



Antinomianism: Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest?

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an ti no mi an *noun* "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.

Antinomianism: Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest? Details

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John says

This is a great short book on the law in the life of the believer. The book focuses on the antinomian controversies in the 17th and early 18th centuries in England and New England.

The book is ostensibly written to oppose the antinomian rhetoric that has appeared in the church of late, but the book itself deals almost exclusively with the Puritan controversy and the resulting literature.

There are some great quotes in the book, many are too long to quote fully here, but one of the best things in the book is the way Jones frames law-keeping in the New Covenant. He writes:

"Because of the greater indicatives of the new covenant, the imperatives are not relaxed, but in fact are strengthened. There are a number of examples in the New Testament that confirm this truth, but John 13:34 seems to be the best and clearest example. Jesus speaks of the 'new commandment' to love one another in the same way as he has loved them. Readers who are familiar with the Old testament might find Jesus' words a little perplexing, because the so-called 'new' commandment seems to be identical to several Old Testament laws, not to mention the fact that the second table of the law is summed up as 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:31). Indeed, Leviticus 19:33-34 and Deuteronomy 15:12-18 seem to be commanding the Israelites to love one another as God has loved them. However, the command in the Old Testament to love 'as I have loved you' has specific reference to the exodus of God's people out of Egypt. God's gracious dealings with his 'treasured possession' (the indicative) provides the reason why they in turn should show the same type of graciousness (the imperative). Christ's words, 'as I have loved you' (John 13:34), are directly connected to his own act of humiliation in John 13:9 foot washing) and his sacrificial death on the cross (Phil. 2:5-11). Christ's humiliation and sacrifice point to a new way in which believers are to love one another. And this model of love is a greater model of love than what is found in the Old Testament, since it was ontologically impossible for God to act in sacrificial love toward his people. In other words, it was the incarnation that made a suffering love possible, and therefore it was only after the incarnation that this heightened form of love could be required on the basis of Christ's own example. Therefore, contrary to antinomianism, the New Testament heightens, not lessens the place of the moral law in the life of the believer, for the indicative has been heightened through Christ's mediatorial work." p. 37-38

That is great stuff, and it is the kind of thing you'll find throughout the book. Antinomian preachers focus almost exclusively on justification and say little, if anything of sanctification. This is something I've seen firsthand myself, and it took me a while to recognize what was happening, but Jones puts it on full display--it is antinomian rhetoric that truncates the gospel--or as Jones calls it--the half-gospel. It loses the "transformative power."

Antinomians speak of the good works of believers as 'filthy rags' but Jones points out that "This verse is not speaking about good works, but about outward displays of religiosity..." p. 69-70

He brings the Puritans in for his defense, quoting many--especially Anthony Burgess, John Owen, Francis Turretin and others. In this particular example--he argues that the "good works" of the believer are good because they are spirit-wrought. He quotes Turretin here:

"The works of believers are good because they are performed 'by a special motion and impulse of the Holy

Spirit, who dwells in the hearts of believers and excites them to good works. It is actually an affront to God to suggest that Spirit-wrought works in believers are 'filthy rags,' for these are works that God has prepared in advance for us to do in order to magnify his grace and glorify the name of Christ (1 Cor. 15:10; John 15:5). The truth is, God is pleased by the works of his people. As Turretin notes, 'The first cause of their acceptance is Christ, in whom we are pleasing to God (Eph. 1:6) because the person is rather pleasing to God and is reconciled to him by the Mediator.'" p. 70-71

This is highly, highly recommended reading. The church needs to hear this today, as antinomianism is "Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest."

Gary says

This is only the second book I have read by the author, but it has very much reminded me why I liked the first and why I think Jones is one of the best reformed writers around. His thought is clear and informed, his writing is concise and measured, and his heart is pastoral and sincere.

Jones leaves me wanting, desperately, to read a lot more Puritan theology.

I also think he is correct in his assessment of antinomianism, as well as in his praise of the general reformed consensus in opposition to that aberrant theology.

Loved it.

David says

Helpful history and analysis of Antinomianism's presence in Reformed theology.

Cbarrett says

Helpful and important work.

Stephen says

We are all Tullianites now. That's the problem. This book is the solution. Read it.

E says

Don't let the shortness of this book conceal the depth of research and insight that Jones has poured into it. He cuts away a lot of the clutter in the current "How binding is the Law on Christians?" debate with clear answers. He upholds the beauty and goodness of the law. He promotes the third use of the law (its use for

directing Christian life). He demonstrates the necessity of good works for salvation (as fruit, not the basis, of course). He shows how it's proper for Christians to be moved to good works by the promise of heavenly reward. He demonstrates that God's love for believers does indeed wax when they are obedient, and wane when not. He encourages good works as a subjective basis for assurance of salvation (not discounting the objective bases of the Word and Christ's work).

All in all, a superb work that anyone could read in a day or two. It will encourage you to pursue holiness without the specter of "legalism."

Steve Hemmeke says

One of the hardest things for Christians, and Christian theologians, to balance is our justification by God's free grace alone, and our duty to obey God's Word. If we are more eager to defend faith alone, we might skip too lightly over our duty to God's law. If we get excited about applying the law to every aspect of our lives, we might lead others to think wrongly that the law justifies us.

Mark Jones aims to guard against the first danger. Interacting mainly with Tullian Tchividjian's recent writings, and also with the Sonship movement, our author takes up the old debate over the law between the Lutheran and Reformed, ably defending the Reformed view.

The Lutheran view opposes law and gospel, even into the Christian life, while the Reformed see them as friends, in Christ. "*The antithesis between the law and the gospel ends the moment someone becomes a Christian*" (Ch. 4, "Sweetly Comply" section, para. 2). "*With the gospel and in Christ, united to him by faith, the law is no longer my enemy but my friend*" (same). Notice that outside of Christ all agree that law and gospel are at odds: law condemns; gospel holds out rescue. But "*As Richard Muller notes, 'The law, for Lutheranism, can never become the ultimate norm for Christian living but, instead, must always lead to Christ who alone is righteous'*" (Ch. 4, "Sweetly Comply" section, para. 3).

This works out in our "street level" piety in this way: to avoid giving any glory to ourselves, average-Joe Reformed-guy will say that everything he does, even the most obedient, is as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:4). We cannot keep the law and never will, so we turn away from it, to the Gospel and accept grace, never to look back to the law. But this is misguided.

"It is actually an affront to God to suggest that Spirit-wrought works in believers are 'filthy rags,' for these are works that God has prepared in advance for us to do in order to magnify his grace and glorify the name of Christ (1 Cor. 15:10; John 15:5)" (Ch. 5, "Good or Filthy" section, para. 3).

See the problem? Do we have to turn away from the law to accept grace? Yes, in the sense that we have to give up trying to keep it for ourselves. No, in the sense that we should still strive to obey God. But it is so easy to turn back to the law, once we have become believers, and fall back into legalism, trying to earn or keep our status with God. So easy, that many believers resist it at all. Any talk of duty or obedience must lead to legalism. No! No! Jones shines at this point, showing all the Scriptures that take us back to obedience, with nary a hint of legalism.

When we say God is pleased with us in Christ, is there no sense in which His pleasure changes based on our obedience? The antinomian, eager to defend God's electing and unchanging love, will quickly say no, there is no aspect of God's love toward us that changes, whether we sin or not, if we are in Christ. But the Bible

speaks of our pleasing God or not, as Christians (2 Sam. 11:27; Col 1:10). This does not mean our obedience determines our salvation, but our obedience (or lack thereof) does affect our relationship with God. The antinomian, on the other hand, will oppose preachers who “warn their people that they can displease God and Christ or that God can be angry with his people, as he often has been (Ezra 9; 2 Kings 17:18)” (Ch. 6, “Displeasing God and Christ” section, para. 4).

Much of this debate revolves around our view of sanctification. The antinomian is prone to say that sanctification is little more than getting used to and living out our justification. The better view is to exhort us as Peter did to work out our salvation. “*The sanctification of the church is an important part of Christ’s glory. It would be incorrect to affirm that we can add to or diminish God’s essential glory. But, again, we may or may not bring glory to the God-man, depending on our obedience or sin*” (Ch. 6, “Pleasing God and Christ” section, para. 3).

May we look to our sanctification at all for assurance that we are in Christ? The antinomian would say no, that will lead to works-righteousness. But the classic Reformer said yes, our obedience is a secondary source of assurance (Ch. 7). The antinomian sees himself as a Christian as still totally depraved, ignoring the work of the Spirit moving him to obedience which pleases God. He assumes he isn’t much different from unbelievers as far as his heart goes. Looking within will only result in despair. The authors of the Westminster Confession of Faith saw it differently when they wrote that assurance is founded in part upon “the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises [of salvation] are made” (WCF 18:2). In other words, God is working something new in you, that will be evident in some ways. This doesn’t mean we are justified in thinking ourselves better morally than unbelievers, generally. But God is doing a work of sanctification in us that He is not doing in unbelievers.

Jones has a difficult PR battle with his thesis. No one who wants to be known as a defender of Reformed doctrines of grace and the five solas wants to imply what sound like caveats to our justification by faith alone. Who wants to appear to demote the importance of justification, the hallmark of the Reformation? And yet, if we are to do justice to all of Scripture, we must be careful not to wave our pet doctrine so loudly that it drowns out other important truths in the Bible. “The antinomians gave a priority to justification that went far beyond what Scripture teaches” (Ch 7. “Antinomian Assurance” section, para. 6). This is an audacious statement when writing to a Reformed audience! But I believe it to be an important caution. We have not exhaustively described the Gospel when we have explained justification. While justification is the capstone of Reformed theology, it is not all of it. It is the hinge on which our salvation turns, but it is not the whole door.

Where you stand in this debate as a pastor will dramatically shape your preaching. Jones critiques the antinomian: “The same repetitive mantras are preached week after week, to the point that if you have heard one sermon, you have heard them all. These are not overstatements. It is very difficult for some preachers to deliver messages each week when they have a sort of ‘systematic theology’ that they need to declare every Lord’s Day” (Ch. 8, “Different Types” section, para. 10).

Jones’ main point is that if we understand the person and work of Christ in His fullness, the apparent tension between law and gospel will resolve itself. Jesus justifies and sanctifies us for His glory.

This book may be especially useful for “cage stage” Calvinists who have just discovered the doctrines of grace, and for elders and pastors considering how to preach (and evaluate preaching on) the whole counsel of God. It isn’t an “entry-level” theology book – you ought to know a little about the Reformed doctrinal landscape before diving in. And he quotes old-language Puritans frequently. But I highly commend this work to you.

Jeff Isenor says

This is more of a text book than a day to day Christian living book.

Daniel Anderson says

Much to my surprise this turned out to be a gem of a book. Author Mark Jones tackles the long standing debate over the validity of God's law in the Christian life. Jones begins the book by tracing a quick history of the 17th century debates between the neonomians, antinomians and what the author refers to as the traditional reformed understanding of the use of the law.

I found this book to be very helpful in addressing the distinction between good works in relation to salvation (justification) ,and the actions of the believer after salvation (sanctification.) Jones added a fresh take to this somewhat tiresome debate - that bridges the gap between salvation by works and salvation by faith alone in a thoroughly orthodox reformed manner.

The law the author maintains is a requirement we must keep in order to know how to please God. Christ kept the law perfectly in human form and therefor set the example for us as believers. To do good works makes our Lord happy, and therefore our life must show forth good works. We know what good works are by understanding and obeying the law.) It is important to mention that in our fallen state this is impossible to do perfectly, but God is pleased because of Christ's perfect life even though our good works are soiled by sin. There are only two criticisms I have of this book. First, I found the authors use of Latin phrases distracting making the prose choppy at times. Secondly, though he uses the term "moral law" he never quite clarifies what he truly means by the term law. That being said I may have missed this clarification in the early pages of the book.

I highly recommend this book to anyone looking for a basic introduction to the validity of the law and works vs grace debates.

Mark Nenadov says

Right off the bat, Mark Jones wins a great deal of sympathy for tackling a tricky topic such as "Antinomianism". It's hardly ever been addressed, especially in the form of a recently released historical study. And yet, this is an important topic, with many pastoral implications.

When it comes to theology, balance and careful attention to biblical nuances is vital, and Mr. Jones does a good job of delicately treating this sensitive area. He affirms and upholds the classic Protestant doctrine of justification by faith apart from works, but with careful precision affirms and insists upon the necessity of works in regard to sanctification, and in a sense, salvation broadly considered.

It should be noted, however, that this book is more of a historical rather than exegetical treatment. Much of it focuses on looking at the subject from a post-Reformation perspective, particularly within the circles of the English Puritans. He draws heavily from Anthony Burgess, John Owen, Herman Witsius, and the like.

Jones shows how being an antinomian is far more than being simply "against the law". It is very much wrapped up in how we view other theological concepts, and ultimately how we view Christ himself. One of

the best aspects of this book is its emphasis on the work of Christ and the work of the Spirit. Jones emphasizes the importance of having a proper Christology, and ties the error of antinomianism to a deficient Christology.

Antinomianism mocks the very idea of the "imitation of Christ". It attempts to drive a strict wedge between promise and duty. There is a incipient discomfort with the thought that the gospel makes demands. . It focuses on justification to the extreme of neglecting the doctrine of sanctification. It recoils away from the Biblical truth that the law, accompanied by the Spirit, has a role to play in sanctification. It is not satisfied to maintain a law/gospel distinction in regard to justification, it must bring it into sanctification as well. It avoids or downplays the idea that in Christ, the law is a friend. Though it refuses to admit it is "against the law", it ultimately has a negative and diminished view of the role of the law in the believer's life. It is also highly uncomfortable with emphasizing the importance and necessity of good works.

This book suggests that this incipient "antinomianism" is currently quite popular in some circles. He succeeds in showing, *almost* without naming any names, that some strains of thought at large in the broadly Reformed community have much more in common with the English Antinomians than it does with the Westminster Assembly.

In avoiding error in this regard, we need to be careful to preserve the biblical "both-and", rather than falling into either-or thinking. Jones, going against the grain of many current teachers such as Tullian Tchividjian, that "sanctification is not 'simply' the art of getting used to our justification" (a catchy but unhelpful and inaccurate platitude).

Jones offers a lot of good insights. He also gives a good analysis of the rhetoric of Antinomianism. Frequently, Antinomians are in more serious error in what they fail to say than in what they do say. And Antinomian preaching is actually fundamentally "boring"--it often repeats mantras and "cute" phrases without getting to the heart of Christ and His person and work.

Ultimately, Jones powerfully demonstrates that the error of Antinomianism will not be fixed by swinging over to the other extreme of Neonomianism, since "Swinging the pendulum too far in the other direction has never effectively combated error".

The solution, ultimately, lies in a careful balance and, ultimately, a good Christology! To Jones, the solution to antinomianism is "to understand and love the person and work of Christ". Jones concludes the book in a fitting way. He concludes that the way to fight against "the Golden white devil" (Samuel Rutherford's way of describing Antinomianism) is by means of Jesus Christ, the one who is "chief among ten thousand".

I would say that Mr. Jones is, intentionally I think, a bit provocative at a few points. No doubt, some people will "cry foul". After all, this book is rather bold, but I believe it provides a much needed corrective. I look forward to seeing the fruits of the discussions this book will undoubtedly provoke.

Much of the controversy that will no doubt arise over this book will be unjustified. That is not to say that there wasn't a point or two that made me raise my eyebrows (which would be consistent with Mr. Jones' attempt to be a bit provocative). And there might be a few areas that might require a bit further discussion and hashing out. That said, it's a solid work and quite on the mark.

I highly recommend this book if you are looking for a relatively comprehensive and searching treatment of the subject, especially if you are most interested at approaching it from a historical perspective.

Timothy Bertolet says

This is a short but great book dealing with the issue of antinomianism or the denial of the use of the Law of God in the Christian life especially for living and holiness.

Mark Jones is an excellent Puritan scholar so he comes at the topic from the perspective of historical theology but this book does not get lost in the forest of church history. In fact, Jones keeps his eye of practical Christian living today and peppers this book with relevant Scriptures.

Jones' treatment allows him to briefly point to warnings and dangers that can surface today both in the Christian's heart and Christian preaching.

Most helpfully he points a way forward: the person and work of Christ. We are not to separate Christ and his benefits. All of his benefits are important and we cannot minimize sanctification as a subsidiary of justification.

His chapter on assurance is one of the briefest but most helpful treatments I have ever read. He reminds the Christian that they are to go back to the promises of God. While part of assurance can come from looking at our justification, we can equally examine the growth in our life (our sanctification) and have assurance because we have seen God's work in us in the progress of holiness. Here again, Jones centers the chapter in Christ and his benefits for us.

This is an excellent little book that hits at a very important issue for today by coming at it through the lens of church history. Jones' writing is clear, succinct and well paced. His style hits home when addressing the believer. You can easily tell that Jones is both a scholar and a pastor.

This book has much to commend and I would recommend it to anyone interested in issues of Reformed theology, pastoral theology, historical theology or just practical Christian living on the topics of sanctification and the value God's commands to a Christian's holiness.

Brian Collins says

As a Puritan scholar and Presbyterian pastor Mark Jones is doubtless glad to see greater interest in Reformed theology. However, he is also concerned that many who identify themselves as grace-based and gospel-centered are actually more antinomian than historically Reformed. Jones provides a helpful history of antinomianism. He argues that the imitation of Christ and obedience to the moral law of God are appropriate guides to sanctification. He further argues that God rewards good works, and that good works are necessary for salvation, though not meritorious of it. Assurance of salvation involves not only reliance on the promises of the gospel but also a recognition of spiritual growth in obedience. In addition, Jones rejects the antinomian sentiment that our disobedience does not affect God's love toward us because God only sees us in Christ and thus does not see our sin. Rather, the Puritans distinguished between an unchanging love of God for us based on our status in Christ and another aspect of his love that is pleased with or obedience and grieved and angered by our disobedience. This summary of positions, however, does not do justice to the exposition of the positions within the book. Well worth reading.

Daniel says

In view of Tullian-gate, this book was a prophetic warning when it was published in 2013. If only more had taken heed to its message back then. Mark Jones convincingly demonstrates that antinomianism is more complex than simple antagonism to the moral law, and that it has pernicious effects on many areas of theology. The book is well-researched and offers convincing counter-arguments to many of the cheap soundbites coming from hipster Calvinists nowadays. This one is worth reading and re-reading.

Michael Boling says

The debate over the relationship between law and gospel has waged since the time of the Christ with some affirming justification by the grace of God provides the believer freedom from the law and with others declaring a more legalistic approach suggesting that salvation includes a heavy dose of law keeping. Somewhere in the middle of those two extremes lies the biblical approach to justification and sanctification and Mark Jones, in his book *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest* efforts to explore this topic using the 17th century debate that waged on this very topic as the backdrop for his discussion.

While the word antinomianism literally means “against God’s law”, one would be hard pressed to find a theologian or pastor, at least one worthy of such a calling, presenting the idea that the believer is no longer tied to any sense of obedience or structure by which obedience can be determined. Jones rightly notes that defining the term antinomianism and identifying those who follow the tenets of that construct is difficult unless this approach is examined as “a system of thought...carefully understood in its historical context, rather than simply according to its etymology.”

Thus, in the first chapter of this helpful book, Jones explains in great detail the historical background of antinomianism, its adherents, as well as those who spoke out and wrote against it. He rightly notes the first antinomians were Adam and Eve with their misunderstanding of God’s grace and His commands to not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. With that said, Jones spends most of his effort looking at this issue as it existed in the time of the Puritans, in particular in England and New England. While some may view this as an unnecessary historical interlude, understanding the viewpoints of those both for and against antinomianism to include how theological constructs such as justification and sanctification were viewed by the Puritan divines as well as those of the antinomian persuasion is vital to grasping how this issue developed over time.

Building on that historical foundation, Jones then makes the salient comment that “Discussions and writings on holiness often lack a strong Christological basis and center” further noting “Without a robust affirmation of the holiness of Christ, and all that means, calls to holiness, however stirring they may be will inevitably devolve into a form of man-centered pietism.” Understanding the proper balance between gospel and law, grace and obedience is rooted in a correct understanding of the person and work of Christ. Those without a properly developed Christology often center their own theology far too much on the grace extended at the cross while ignoring the life Christ lived on our behalf, a life that also provides the believer the standard for holiness. This necessarily includes some level of human responsibility for obedience to God’s commands which is something those of the antinomian persuasion vehemently argue against and as Jones notes the antinomian often believes there is “no longer a continuing role for God’s moral law in the life of the believer.”

Of particular note in recent conversations is the role of the law in the life of the believer. Jones aptly comments “The role of the law in the life of the Christian has historically been one of the most difficult and contentious points in divinity.” Addressing many of the concerns that have existed over the years on this issue, Jones ably works through the various positions on the role of the law demonstrating the tension that exists among theologians on this important issue. This concern was rampant during the 17th century and Jones spends a good deal of time looking at the opposing positions noting that when it comes to trying to define the position of the antinomian camp, “A close reading of antinomian writings from the seventeenth century shows that they were not always clear. Ambiguity was a hallmark of their utterances on the law, and they lacked the sophistication found in the writings of men like Sibbes, Goodwin, and Owen.” While the antinomians often looked for the means by which to diminish the importance of the law, the Westminster Confession of Faith and the sermons and writings of the Puritan divines viewed obedience to the law as a continued importance for the believer. Jones states “Because of the greater indicatives of the new covenant, the imperatives are not relaxed, but in fact are strengthened.” He is also careful to continually note that any level of obedience is through the work of the Holy Spirit and the process of progressive sanctification, thus avoiding any notation that somehow the believer is able to accomplish good works of their own accord.

Another valuable discussion in this timely book is that of the issue of rewards, a discussion sorely missing from the sermon series of most pastors today likely due to the association of rewards with the supposed naughty term of “law”. Jones engages some hefty theological terminology in this chapter such as the word impetration, a term related to Christ’s mediatorial work. Jones avers the issue with the antinomian approach is they “essentially blurred the distinction between impetration and application. They were so concerned to maintain the graciousness of salvation that they not only denied that there were no conditions for salvation..but also suggested that even in the application of salvation man does not “act”. While some may balk at the idea of any condition for salvation, Jones is careful to define that phrase even further noting “The Reformed held firmly to the view that the elect have no role in impetrating their salvation. That hone belongs exclusively to Christ. But in the application of salvation, man plays a role” meaning there is the need for the bride to be an obedient bride through the work of the Holy Spirit bringing them to a place of maturity in the faith.

With books of this subject matter, it is quite easy for the author to slip into an accusatory and polemic writing style, along the way lambasting those who take the opposing position. Jones thankfully avoids such an approach, instead choosing to work through the antinomian position and the Reformed position in great detail and with much grace, noting the complexity of the issue being discussed. While many individuals who affirm the antinomian position are indeed noted by name to include Tullian Tchividjian whose book *Jesus + Nothing = Everything* is noted by Jones as somewhat of the impetus for him writing this book on antinomianism, Jones leaves the polemics at the door instead approaching this subject matter with theological precision with a focus on demonstrating the clear pitfalls of the imbalance found in the antinomian position regarding obedience and the place of God’s law.

I highly recommend this book for the more seasoned believer and especially for pastors and Seminary students. Holiness is a vital part of the Christian walk and understanding the proper balance between the indicative and the imperative, two intimately related aspects of justification and sanctification. Jones saliently outlines for the reader the proper approach to the issue of law and gospel and this is a book that will serve as a needed corrective for the problematic extremes of too much grace and too much law.

Pascal Denault says

Very good, especially the chapter on God's love
