



FAKE THEOLOGY:

Reflections on Antinomianism Past and Present

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Antinomianism is a prevailing modern heresy. It comes in many shapes. Just about everybody "wants out" and thus seems to be some kind of antinomian. We have all learned to complain loudly and long about legalism, about heteronomy, about absolutism, about fixed and inflexible norms and standards of any and every sort. That everyone should have the right to "do their own thing" seems virtually to be the dogma of the age. If laws and norms get in the way, they can be discredited as relics of an outmoded "lifestyle," and changed to fit what we call contemporary-lived experience. Antinomianism is the spiritual air we breathe.

The trouble is that hardly anyone seems aware of the heresy, or perhaps cares. We don't seem to know what it is, what causes it or what to do about it. The purpose of this essay is to reflect a bit on the essence and root causes of antinomianism in its various forms, ancient and modern, so as by implication, at least, to afford some insight into what might be done about it. Since this issue of *dialog* marks the anniversary of the birth and baptism of Martin Luther it is fitting that such reflection be offered from the perspective of his own battle against antinomianism. We are well used to the Luther who fought, like St. Paul, for freedom from the law. We are not very well apprised of the Luther who attacked antinomianism, or of the precise and careful way in which he fought that battle. We need to

know more about it. This essay makes no claim to fill the need by way of historical analysis. It attempts only to reflect a bit on the issues involved from perspectives gained by looking at the historical debates.

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The "Essence" of Antinomianism.

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Antinomianism is fake theology. In Luther's picturesque way of putting it, it is a drama played in an empty theater.¹ It is a theological playing with words: the attempt to get rid of, to change, to water down "the law"—that which makes demands, attacks, accuses or threatens us—by a theological *tour-de-force*, by changing words. One tries to end the law by erasing the offensive words or finding more accommodating ones, by changing definitions and usages, or more lately by shifting or just multiplying metaphors and symbols until the matter is obscured beyond recognition. One creates the illusion of escape from "the law" by a verbal sleight of hand. That is where the problem arises, of course. The illusion of escape only imprisons all the more. Nothing is accomplished. The theater for the wordplay is empty.

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The root cause of antinomianism is failure to apprehend the gospel in its full eschatological sense. The point of the gospel is that "Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified" (Rom. 10, 4). *Christ*, not theology, is the end of the law to *faith*, experienced as new life from death, the breaking in of the eschaton. Where Christ is not grasped by faith as the end of the law, then we with our theology must take steps to *put* an end to law. We must attempt to banish law from the church or its preaching perhaps, by relegating it to the courthouse. Or we go through our theological books and erase law wherever it appears, thinking to accomplish something thereby. We think to give the gospel a boost by refusing to preach or talk about the law. But all that is simply a failure to understand what the gospel is and what it does.

As the name indicates, antinomianism arises in religion generally and particularly in the Christian church, as a reaction, an "anti-" movement. It arises in reaction to *nomism*, to a prior refusal to allow the eschatological gospel to have its way. What happens more often than not in the church is that the eschatological outlook and hope is displaced by law as an eternal order and nothing is allowed to break its hold or disrupt its continuity. Eschatology is banished from the church and from the Christian life. Law is always the bottom line. Antinomianism is usually a desperate last-ditch reaction to the strangle hold of nomism in a church which has given up on eschatology and settled down to being "practical" and "relevant" to this age.

As such, antinomianism is a complex and interesting phenomenon theologically, because it is the attempt to correct one mistake by another. It attempts to correct the mistake of nomism just by becoming theologically anti-nomian, to remedy the loss of eschatology by constructing a theologically "realized" eschatology. Its mistake is to assume that the law ends or changes (the Kingdom comes) just because our theological books and assertions say so. It assumes that it is possible to end or banish law, somehow, this side of the eschaton.

At the same time, a theology seduced by nomism (all too often the case in the church) is ill equipped to do battle with antinomianism. Since it has already compromised the eschatological gospel, it can fight only from the position of law and charge its opponents with the "terrible heresy" of being anti-law. Thus the term "antinomian." One gets the impression that whereas other heresies are relatively mild, being antinomian is about the worst thing one could be! At any rate, to defend itself, nomism appeals to already given anti-gospel sentiments, compounding the confusion. So the general victory of nomism over antinomianism in the church is

hardly cause for celebration. Nothing is solved. No insight into the nature of the problem is gained. The war of words is only inflated and the issues become more and more obscured. Worst of all, antinomianism just goes underground to reappear covertly among those who thought to banish it. Then it becomes really insidious. More of that a bit later.

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*Overt Antinomianism.*  
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Since the root cause of antinomianism is failure to grasp the gospel's eschatological impact and its relation to faith, it is to be expected that antinomianism can take different forms—as many, perhaps, as the different failures to grasp the gospel. Indeed, one of the reasons for the prevalence of the heresy is that ignorance of the cause produces blindness to the effects. We don't usually know it when we see it. To get at the problem it is helpful, I think, to begin by making a distinction between overt and covert antinomianism.

Overt antinomianism is a direct and frontal attack on the law. It is open and honest. This is what is usually understood by the term "antinomian." Overt antinomianism simply asserts that since Christ is the end of the law, law is no longer of theological import and should be removed from the preaching of the church. Law has come to a temporal (Christ's death and resurrection) and perhaps also spatial (banished from the church to the courthouse) end. As John Agricola put it in Luther's day, true repentance is not produced by preaching the law, but rather from the sweet comfort of the gospel. Law is not a theological matter now that Christ has triumphed. All things are new.

Even though overt antinomianism has through history attracted most of the attention, arousing the ire of nomist sentiment and consequently being vilified as a most heinous heresy, it is actually the most benign form of antinomianism. Covert antinomianism, as we shall see, is infinitely more dangerous because it arises basically out of underestimation of or despair over the gospel. The problem with overt antinomianism, however, is a kind of impatience, an "enthusiasm" about the gospel which tries to transcend the limits of faith. It is an attempt to realize the eschaton by a theological *tour-de-force*. Because one is so powerfully grasped by the gospel one is impatient to be rid of the law, and so takes steps to banish it by *theological* means. One erases it from theology and preaching and banishes it from the church. While this is a mistake, it is usually not of very serious consequence, since it is

rooted in an understanding of the powerful impact of the gospel. As long as one is grasped by that, the heresy is relatively benign. Abuses can arise, of course, when the impact of the gospel fades to mere sentimentality and becomes the occasion for self-indulgence. The usual ploy then is to return to legalism to avert disaster. Then we are back to square one.

The error of overt antinomianism is to forget that Christ is the end of the law *to faith*. In *Christ* apprehended by *faith* the end has come, but not yet otherwise. The *theology* of overt antinomianism outruns faith and attempts to realize the eschaton in purely verbal fashion by just shouting the law down. What is to be done about antinomianism must therefore be very carefully calculated. If, as is usually the case, one undertakes to argue flatly that the law or part of it (the moral law, for instance) does not end in Christ but just goes on in some fashion or other, the jig is up for the gospel as well. Antinomianism is countered merely by "pronomianism" and the battle is lost. One may save society from the consequences of antinomianism that way but saving faith will be lost.

Luther, in his day, confronted mostly overt antinomianism, in the form advocated by Agricola. It is crucial to note the careful way in which Luther nuances his arguments so as not to destroy the eschatological nature of the gospel, which he had fought so hard to establish. His basic argument is not that antinomianism is just wrong, but rather that it is *impossible*. Theologically considered, that is, antinomianism is an impossible heresy! One simply cannot get rid of the law by theological word-play this side of the eschaton. One only makes matters worse. This Luther in his sermon "Against the Anti-nomians" says that they "... do nothing more than throw out the poor letters: 'L-A-W,' but only reinforce the wrath of God thereby, which is interpreted and understood by these letters."² Antinomianism is fake theology.

Luther's argument is eschatologically tuned throughout. It is not, that is, a "pronomian" argument. His contention is not that the *hope* or the *aim* of antinomianism is wrong, but that it fails because it is premature, not up to the task, not good enough. Only Christ is the end of the law. And Christ can be apprehended now only by faith. Therefore, while we still live "in the flesh" this side of eschaton, the law continues to sound. The repeated theme of Luther's disputes with the antinomians is that law correlates with sin and death:

14. Necessarily, therefore, in as far as they are under death, they are still also under the law and sin.
15. They are altogether ignorant and deceivers of souls who endeavor to abolish the law from the Church.
16. For that is not only stupid and impious, but *absolutely impossible*.

17. For if you want to remove the law, it is necessary at the same time to remove sin and death.³

As long as sin and death remain law remains, and it is impossible for humans to stop it by any means whatsoever. The end can only be eschatological, anticipated and participated in only by faith. Only to the extent that one is in Christ, that is, it is "safe" to be "antinomian":

10. Indeed, in Christ the law is fulfilled, sin abolished and death destroyed.
11. That is, when through faith we are crucified and have died in Christ, such things are also true in us.
40. Now, in so far as Christ is raised in us, in so far are we without law, sin and death.⁴

The hope is not wrong. As is so often the case, however, theology preempts the place of Christ and thus becomes a fake. Antinomianism fails because it substitutes theology for Christ.

"Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?" That of course is the question vis-à-vis antinomianism. St. Paul answered it as all true preachers of the gospel will answer: "By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law" (Rom. 3, 31). Precisely because faith sees that Christ alone is the end of the law, that law correlates with sin and death and cannot be removed by our theologies, law is established this side of the eschaton. Precisely because the gospel is an unconditional promise, justification an unconditional gift, faith sees law in its absolute clarity, stringency, and strength. Precisely because Christ (and Christ alone!) gives perfectly that to which the law points, there can be no reason for or attempt to tamper with the law. When the end is given, the law is established. All theological fakery is over.

The eschatological nature of the argument against overt antinomianism is crucial because it will govern the manner in which one deals with other forms of antinomianism. If one fails to see it is not the *hope* that is wrong but the theological attempt to realize it prematurely, one ends by arguing against the hope as well. Then the argument against antinomianism becomes an argument against the gospel and eschatological salvation.

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*Covert Antinomianism.*  
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When Christ and the gospel are not apprehended as the end of the law, when the eschatological hope fades or is obscured, when preachers lose their courage or get nervous about how the unconditional promise will affect morality, then means

other than the direct frontal attack on law must be resorted to. If there is neither end in sight nor promise of such end, and the overt attempt to manufacture one theologically is manifest failure, one must take steps to change, ameliorate, water-down, blunt, the force of the law. Thus is born a rarely detected form of antinomianism. We can call it covert antinomianism—covert because it is for the most part unperceived and even unwitting. It usually passes for a more genuine form of piety and high ethical and moral seriousness. It resists overt antinomianism with a shocked disavowal, but then unwittingly takes over many of its arguments in a form which makes them infinitely more insidious and dangerous. Instead of a clear end to the law covert antinomianism tries to ameliorate the law's stringency by a *change* of the law, either in content or function.

Covert antinomianism is ultimately much more dangerous and debilitating than the overt sort, because it is the result of an underestimation of or nervousness about the eschatological power of the gospel. Eventually such underestimation and nervousness issue in resignation and despair. The hope is gone; there is no light at the end of the tunnel. The best we can do to comfort ourselves then is to reduce the law to manageable proportions, cut it down to size. As long as such antinomianism remains even remotely attuned to the gospel, it does realize that the gospel is to have some effect on the law. But since the gospel does not end the law it can only change the law in some way. It is again a theological *tour-de-force*. It is, you might say, a futile attempt to make law *sound* like gospel. Under the guise of regard for the law it pulls the teeth of the law. Instead of really getting bitten we just get gummed to death!

Covert antinomianism, seen in this light, comes in many different forms. Early in Christian history some tried to accommodate to law by altering the law's content, arguing that while ceremonial law came to an end with Christ, the moral law did not. Nervousness about the effectiveness of the gospel in the confessional generation of Protestantism resulted in the positing of an added *function* of the law: a "third use" by the "reborn Christian." The gospel does make a difference, supposedly, but only such as to add to the function of the law. But the function is really a watering-down and blunting of the impact of the law. Instead of ordering and attacking, law is supposed to become a rather gentle and innocuous "guide." More recent biblical exegetes do something of the same sort when they try to comfort us with the information that to the ancient Israelite law was really not so bad but as part of *Torah* a blessing.

In ethics we seem readily to take to contextual-

izing, or rather easily modifying, law to accommodate our preferences. No doubt laws do need to be changed to fit the times. But it would seem that they should be changed to *attack* sin in the new forms it takes, not to accommodate it. Under the guise of concern for ethics, morality, and justice, law is watered down and blunted to accommodate our fancies. When there is no end in sight that is the only way we can make peace with law.

But once again, this is fake theology. If overt antinomianism is impossible, covert antinomianism is even more so. It will not work. The law just changes its tack and becomes, if anything, worse. Is there any comfort in the idea that the ceremonial law ends, but not the moral? And what, finally, is the difference between them? Are the first three commandments ceremonial or moral? Does the law attack any less just because theologians say it is a friendly guide? Or does that only make matters worse? Is the idea that *Torah* was a blessing to ancient Israel of any comfort to a twentieth-century gentile? Have we really escaped from anything by all the contextualizing and interpreting and relativizing? Or have we succeeded only in bringing the voice of despair closer?

When the attempt is made to make law *sound* like gospel by purely verbal change, the gospel also, of course, becomes pointless and simply lapses into a kind of sentimental reassurance for our preferences. The gospel loses its vigor and rigor as a life-giving word, Christ is reduced to the "sweet Jesus" of mass media piety. Luther was well aware of this, way back there in his battles with the antinomians, and saw it as the work of the devil.

The devil knows very well . . . that it is impossible to remove the law from the heart. . . . But the devil devotes himself to making men secure, teaching them to heed neither law nor sin, so that if sometime they are suddenly overtaken by death or by a bad conscience, they have grown so accustomed to nothing but sweet security that they sink helplessly into hell. For they have learned to perceive nothing in Christ but sweet security. Therefore such terror must be [taken as] a sure sign that Christ (whom they understand as sheer sweetness) has rejected and forsaken them. That is what the devil strives for, and that is what he would like to see.⁵

Antinomianism of all sorts succeeds only in making matters worse. The law does not go away by theological arrangement. It comes back, though unrecognized, in worse and more devastating form. The fact is that there really *is* no other end to the law than the Christ who died under the law and nevertheless was raised.

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*Linguistic Antinomianism.*  
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The argument against antinomianism as fake theology, as mere word-play which fails because it outruns or falls short of the reality it is attempting to mediate, opens up an interesting perspective on the use in theology of language in general. This is reinforced when we recall that for Luther "law" did not mean merely laws but anything and everything that accuses, especially the way language attacks the lost. What do we do when our language—particularly our religious language—turns on us? The most immediate and dominant answer in our day seems to be to erase it, to change it, to blunt its effect by dissolving it in a sea of pluralistic options. The stratagem, that is, is exactly the same as that of the antinomians. So we must complete this essay by raising the question whether the predominant form of antinomianism today is not a kind of pervasive linguistic antinomianism, the idea that whenever we encounter that which threatens and judges and accuses or just generally upsets our preferences, the way to solve our problems is just to play with the words, change them, shift them, erase them, thinking that thereby we have accomplished something.

Current discussion about the problem of "sexist" language and the use of metaphor in theology is an example of the temptation to linguistic antinomianism. It is quite true that the language we use turns on us and attacks in unexpected and even unsuspected ways (*lex semper accusat!*). It is also true that language can be used either intentionally or unintentionally to oppress. But the idea that much of anything is really accomplished merely by erasing or changing the language is antinomian folly. We need, of course, to be constantly on guard against the ways in which we use language to accommodate sin and perpetuate injustice. It is the task of language to restrain and attack such perfidy (first and second uses of the law). But merely changing the metaphors or the language when one has no perception of the end only makes matters worse. The law only changes its guise and becomes more devastating because it is supposed to be "gospel."

This is not the place to go into a thorough discussion of the complicated issues involved. From the perspective of the analysis of the antinomian mistake, however, it becomes apparent that mere change from male to female or even neuter gender accomplishes little more than to obscure the issues. If "the Father" is a threat to us, who shall convince us that "the Mother" is not also—in "her"

own way. It is quite possible, is it not, when one considers the fact that the gospel *establishes* the law, that one should find "the law" stated in its most uncompromising fashion precisely where the gospel is believed? If "the Father" is the clearest statement of this, then what is accomplished by unreflective and hasty change to "the Mother," except to confuse by a futile attempt to lessen the statement of the law? The on-again, off-again alternation between "he" and "she" falls into the same trap.

The current fashion of talk about the metaphorical nature of theological language would also benefit from a closer look at the antinomianism heresy. Those who push "metaphorical theology" seem to think that recognition of the metaphorical character of theological language will save us from all the ills that beset us: literalism, heteronomy, patriarchalism, religious exclusivism, theological imperialism, and so forth and so on. If we would just realize the parabolic nature (extended metaphor) of communication and take Jesus as a parable of God we would be out of the woods.⁶ It is difficult to escape the impression that for a host of thinkers today the solution to all our problems is word-play. If we get into trouble with a "metaphor" we can just change it. Metaphors seem to be basically interchangeable, and since we can make them or break them or shift them around at will we are in charge of our own destiny. But that is just linguistic antinomianism. It will not work.

"Language is the house of being." So we have been taught today—by Heidegger, I guess. But then it is also true that language is the prisonhouse of being. Unless there is an actual *end* to the law, unless there is one who actually "breaks out," there is no hope. All we do then by changing our language is give the illusion of freedom by offering a choice of cells, or perhaps even a "pluralism" of them. When eschatological hope is lost we think that "gospel" means making the prison as comfortable as possible. But that is fake theology.

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*Christ the End of the Law.*  
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The only cure for antinomianism of all sorts is the proclamation of the unconditional gospel of the crucified and risen Christ. He was destroyed by our language, he was done in by law, sin, and death, and yet raised. And that is the end of it. *Christ*, not theological word-play, is the end of the law, that those who have faith may be justified. Anything

other than that is futile, fake. But we must hold on to the fact that there is an end. Antinomianism is right about that, certainly much more right than nomism. But Christ, not denial or change of "the law," is the end, the hope of humanity. If "the Father" has become a burden for us, then I expect it is only Christ who can reconcile us to him. At least that seems to be the claim of the New Testament. Indeed, it is because only Christ is the end that the law is established. Because this one man, this person with his history, is the concrete and actual end of the story, then the history, the story itself is established. The language, that is, has reached its conclusion. There is nothing more to say. Thus it cannot be changed at will. The once-for-all, the offense, has been set. Jesus is not a parable of God. The point of the doctrine of the Trinity is that he *is* God from God. Only when we forget that Christ alone is the end do we resort to our own artifices to make fake endings.

For the most part in this essay I have considered antinomianism from a theological rather than an ethical point of view. The reason for that is that mostly we don't realize or recognize the theological dimensions of the heresy. I hope these reflections have made them a bit more clear. But perhaps we should say something about the ethical dimensions before stopping. After all, it seems to be mostly the ethical consequences of antinomianism that have made people nervous through the ages—even though consistent antinomians are few and far between!

The claim that Christ is the end of the law to faith seems to make people nervous. The idea that the Christian as "new being" "walks by the Spirit" lends itself too easily, it is feared, to self-indulgence. One can, as the Formula of Concord put it, ". . . under the pretext of the Holy Spirit's guidance set up a self-elected service of God without his Word and command."⁷ The new being in Christ takes on too much the aspect of a mystical

theologoumenon with no concrete reality. The outcome of such fears is usually pell-mell retreat to some species of nomism—usually covertly attenuated to make it attractive or manageable. The result is loss of the gospel.

Here we simply have to face the fact that there is no cure other than a more radical proclamation of Christ as the end of the law who because he is the end establishes the law prior to the end. When the end is given we no longer need to be antinomians. This, it seems to me was Luther's point in all his writings on the matter. Because the end is given we can enter gladly into life under law for the time being, to care for the world, for others, and do battle with sin and the devil. When there is no end we have no time for that. Either we must spend all our time trying to reach the end or creating an end we can (supposedly) reach. We must become either nomists or antinomists. When the end is given in Christ, however, the law is established for its proper uses. The law, Luther always insisted, was not given to make people merely pious, but to draw them into the world of the neighbor where they can be of some use. Where Christ is the end of the law that is what happens. It is the task of Christian preaching to put an end to theological fakery so that can begin to happen.

Notes

1. WA 39, I, 355. (Fifth Disputation Against Antinomianism, Thesis 32).
2. WA 50, 474, 34 ff. Cf. LW 47, 115.
3. WA 39, I, 354.
4. Ibid. 355-56.
5. LW 47, 111.
6. See, for instance, Sally McFague, *Metaphorical Theology*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982.
7. *Book of Concord*. Translated and Edited by Theodore G. Tappert. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 567.