

CHAPTER 14

Reigning Grace AND LEGALISM & ANTINOMIANISM



Patrick J. Griffiths @ 2009

Waukesha Bible Church is a family of families seeking to live in **the Storyline of the Bible**. She is determined by design to have a **God-centered, Christ-exalting worship; a Word-centered teaching** focused on personal **discipleship** through intentional and systematic instruction; a **Global-impacting mission** that resolves to be a **church planting church**; and a **Grace-based fellowship** where disciples are invited to live under a **reigning grace** characterized by a **Gospel-driven sanctification** that celebrates a divine **monergism** to the Christian life.

CHAPTER 14

REIGNING GRACE, LEGALISM, AND ANTINOMIANISM¹

¹ Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life in **Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.** ³ For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ **so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us,** who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:1-4)



Free From The Law, O Happy Condition *also published as "Once For All" by P.P. Bliss*

Free from the law,
Oh happy condition,
Jesus has bled
And there is remission,
Curs'd by the law
And bruised by the fall,
Grace hath redeemed us
Once for all.

[Chorus]
Once for all,
Oh, sinner receive it,
Once for all,
Oh, brother, believe it;
Cling to the cross,
The burden will fall
Christ hath redeemed us
Once for all.

Reigning Grace, Legalism, and Antinomianism

Now we are free -
There's no condemnation,
Jesus provides
A perfect salvation.
"Come unto Me,"
Oh, hear his sweet call,
Come, and He saves us
Once for all.

[Chorus]

"Children of God,"
Oh, glorious calling,
Surely his grace
Will keep us from falling;
Passing from death
To life at his call;
Blessed salvation
Once for all.

[Chorus]



Question:

“Is grace living against the Law?”



Answer:

This is an excellent question. Part of the issue in answering the question is in the defining of terms. Throughout the New Testament, several “laws” are noted.

Often the question asked, “Is the New Testament believer under the Old Testament Law?” “Is the New Testament believer under *any* Law?” Both questions are valid and worthy of our attention. I believe the New Testament addresses the question and provides for us an answer.

First, there are several laws referred to throughout the New Testament. There is the Law of Moses and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 12:5, etc.). There is the law that governs the people of the land (Matt. 5:25). There is the law of faith (Rom. 3:27). There is the law of God and of sin (Rom. 7:25). There is the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). And there is the law of liberty and the royal law of James 1:25, 2:12, and 2:8.

Though these are distinct, there is an organic relationship between all laws. There was a law preceding the giving of the Mosaic code and there is law following the Mosaic code. Yet for today's New Testament believer the law of Christ, liberty, and royal, are all saying the same thing. Grace squeezes the vital essence from law and shows the essence of the law to be a love for God and one's neighbor. This does not make the believer lawless, but it does say that against him there is no law (Gal. 5:23).

Second, the Law of Moses though full of rules and regulations was secondary to the greater truth of loving the Lord. When asked which is the greatest commandment in the Law, our Lord Jesus said, "To love the Lord thy God" and the second is like unto this, "To love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:36, 40; Gal. 5:14). Paul says as much in Romans 13:8 and 10. James calls this the law of liberty and the royal law (James 1:25; 2:8, 12). It is the law of love. Our Lord rebuked the Scribes and Pharisees for neglecting the weightier provisions of the law: justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matt. 23:23). It was not at the expense of the other, but the heartbeat of the Law was found in one's attitude toward God and his neighbor.

Third, Jesus Himself came not to abolish the Law or the Prophets, but rather to fulfill (Matt. 5:17; Luke 24:44). However, in "accomplishing the demands of the Law, it passed" (Matt. 5:18). His intent was not to destroy the Law by violence, but to fulfill its requirements and thus "deactivate" its curse. According to Luke 16:16, 17 Jesus Christ is the fulfiller of the Law. He kept the Law thus bringing it to its end for the people of God. Because of our identity in Christ, the requirements of the Law are fulfilled for us (Rom. 8:4). Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:4).

Fourth, the Law given through Moses stands in contrast to that which came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). Regardless as to what one might think, there is a strong distinction between what preceded the cross event and what followed.

Fifth, the Law could not do what only Jesus Christ could (Acts 13:39). The Law of Moses could not justify anyone (Rom. 3:20, 28; Gal. 2:16; 3:11, 21). Nor was justification its intent.

Sixth, there is a part of the Law that precedes the giving of the Law woven in the heart of every individual (Rom. 2:14, 15). This is the divine imprint that is found within the immaterial aspect of every image-bearing element. There are moral aspects contained in the

Law that preceded their expression through the medium of the printed page. They existed before the Law and exist after the Law's demise because they are part of God's moral nature. Perhaps the following chart will assist in understanding how the moral character of God exhibits itself through the Mosaic Code.

Innocence	Conscience	Human Government	Promise	Law			Grace	Kingdom	Eternal State
				Moral	Ceremonial	Civil			

The Moral Character of God

- The moral character of God is in His very essence. He can be nothing but moral.
- The moral character of God transcends dispensational distinctions.
- In the Law of Moses, God's morality becomes legislated to the nation. In this dispensation, since no nation functions as a theocracy, morality is not legislated. This does not leave the citizens of any nation victims of an amoral culture, since Romans 13:1ff defines what constitutes good government.
- The Mosaic code is inseparably linked to the moral character of God.
- The Law is an indivisible whole. To abandon a part is to lose the whole.
- Christians do not seek to follow the moral law of God as expressed in the Mosaic Code. That aspect or expression of it, is very much part of a theocratic nation.
- Christians do exhibit the moral character of God, but such an exhibition is a fruit or consequence of one's position in Christ and empowerment by the Holy Spirit.

Seventh, New Testament believers are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:14, 15; 7:6). In Christ, the believer has been set free from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:2). He has now died to the Law (Gal. 2:19). Galatians 3:1-5 is clear concerning the place of the Law in the life of the believer. It can do nothing concerning salvation, sanctification, and service. New Testament believers, being led by the Spirit, are not under the Law (Gal. 5:18). Spirit living is law free living (Gal. 5:23). The law was not designed for the righteous (1 Tim. 1:9).



WHAT ABOUT ANTINOMIANISM?

In considering the idea of “antinomianism,” it should become apparent there is much confusion as to what exactly it is.

In The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, R.D. Linder’s article on “Antinomianism” says it . . .

Refers to the doctrine that it is not necessary for Christians to preach and/or obey the moral law of the OT.² He goes on to say, “Some have taught that once persons are justified by faith in Christ, they no longer have any obligation toward the moral law because Jesus has freed them from it.”³

His conclusion leaves me somewhat perplexed.

Certainly most orthodox Christians today agree that the law served the twin purposes of establishing the fact of human sin and of providing moral guidelines for Christian living. Orthodoxy teaches that the moral principles of the law are still valid, not as objective strivings but as fruits of the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the believer.⁴

Augustus Strong makes the following comment concerning antinomianism:

[They] hold that since Christ’s obedience and sufferings have satisfied the demands of the law, the believer is free from obligation to observe it.⁵

He sums up the doctrine of Christian freedom as opposed to Antinomianism by noting:

We may say that Christ does not free us from the law as a rule of life.⁶

Yet, such comments are directly opposed to what the Scripture teaches in the above sighted passages.

What is antinomianism?" It is the heresy without a face, presently infecting the vitals of Professing Evangelical Christianity. Antinomianism comes from the Greek words "anti" against, and "nomos" law-- "against law." It was considered a heretical doctrine by the Early Church of the 2nd Century, being championed by the Gnostics, i.e., who believed

matter to be evil, the spirit good, and salvation to come by secret knowledge (gnosis) granted to initiates.

Antinomians believe in freedom from the obligation to obey the Moral Law to be saved. Licentiousness is the lack of moral restraint that accompanies antinomianism. Gospel Salvation is not freedom from the Moral Law, but freedom to obey the Moral Law. The Moral Law is not the Civil Law of Old Testament Israel, nor is it the Ceremonial Law of worship for the ancient Jew, but it is the unchanging requirement of supreme love for God, and an equal love for our neighbor as our self. Where there is not this Condition of Justification fulfilled of complete and entire obedience to the Moral Law, there cannot be Gospel Salvation. Antinomianism today, takes advantage of the ignorance of Professing Christianity concerning the true nature of our Justification by Faith, stressing grace and faith apart from obedience to the Moral Law.⁷

I do not look to the Mosaic Law as a guiding principle in my life. I do believe that the moral aspects of the law were valid prior to the writing of the Mosaic code. In addition, I would equally argue that in principle they have been restated by the apostle Paul. However, I do not follow the moral law as opposed to the civil and ceremonial law. If this is what makes one an antinomian, then so be it.

The issue of moral purity in the context of antinomianism is invalid. The Law is not what keeps the believer moral. It is the grace of God that teaches us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts (Titus 2:12). It is the Holy Spirit who is producing in and through His people, His holiness. Paul's argument in Colossians 2:20-23 says that "laws/rules" "are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh." To argue that antinomianism is morally degenerating is unfounded.

"Dispensationalists have consistently been charged with being antinomian."⁸ This is a charge they readily deny. Do I believe in the removal of the New Testament believer from the Old Testament Mosaic Law? Absolutely, but this does not mean I believe the Christian is without law. I do, however, believe my absolute obedience is impossible apart from the Holy Spirit's empowerment. In addition, even with His enablement, I stand daily in violation of it. I also believe that Christ is keeping for me the "law" perfectly.

I believe my understanding of the believer's relationship to the Mosaic Law is in keeping with Renald Showers, *There Really Is a Difference*, on pages 187-194.

In contrast with the Covenant Theology view, Dispensational Theology holds the position that Christians today are not under any aspect of the Mosaic Law, even the moral aspect. (187) In addition, the fact that a person is not under the moral aspect of the Mosaic Law does not mean that he is unrelated to the eternal, unchangeable, moral absolutes of God. Since God's moral absolutes are eternal, they have been in effect throughout all of history; thus they were in effect before God instituted the Mosaic Law at Mount Sinai.⁹



IN CONCLUSION

- First, when grace is properly understood, the issue of antinomianism becomes a moot point.
- Second, Christians are not under any aspect of the Mosaic code as found in the Mosaic code.
- Third, Christians are not lawless. They are under the law of Christ.
- Fourth, the consequence of grace is not the liberty to sin, but the liberty not to sin. Grace leads to holiness, not lasciviousness. Laws and legalism provide a platform for sin's expression.
- Fifth, any society marked by order is equally marked by rules. Rules are not inherently legalistic. Legalism is always an attitude more than an action. In a society made up of sinful, unregenerate people, rules prohibit the unruly and protect the righteous.

Before closing this study I would like us to consider nine aspects of legalism as they exist within the Christian life. Throughout the New Testament there is a distinct dichotomy between grace and law. To be in and under grace is to be free in Christ. To be in and under law is to be in bondage and slavery. We have used the term legalist to describe those who are in and under law, yet what do we mean by "legalism?" Warren Wiersbe gives us this clear definition of legalism.

We must keep in mind that *legalism* does not mean the setting of spiritual standards; it means worshiping these

standards and thinking that we are spiritual because we obey them. It also means judging other believers based on these standards. The old nature loves legalism, because it gives the old nature a chance to ‘look good.’¹⁰



Thus, LEGALISM IS NOT WHAT YOU DO; IT IS WHY YOU DO IT THAT MAKES YOU A LEGALIST. John Piper correctly notes that. . .

Legalism is present whenever a person is trying to be ethical in his own strength.¹¹

He equally argues that legalism is present whenever we try to make other people ethical through conformity to rules. In so doing, we are lacking confidence in the sovereign power of God to complete that which He alone began and He alone can finish.

As I have meditated on these things, I have noted nine observations concerning legalism. I trust you will find this helpful.

1. Legalism believes man’s obedience cooperates with grace instead of believing it is a consequence of grace.

Any act of obedience on my part is simply a consequence of the Holy Spirit bearing His fruit in me and through me to those around me.

2. Legalism believes what it merits by grace must now be maintained by works.

What I could not merit by works I cannot now maintain by works. The Christian life is from “grace to grace.”

3. Legalism believes man’s obedience makes God a debtor to him for good.

The legalist believes that God is obligated to “bless” us with “good things” because we have lived exemplary lives. When hardship comes, we are shocked because we have done our best to “do right.”

4. Legalism views the New Testament imperative as a moral obligation.

The New Testament was not written to tell us how to live, but to show us what He is like. The imperative is the outworking of the Holy Spirit bearing His fruit through these “earthen vessels.” To

think the believer is now obligated to carry out the New Testament imperative is to place him under a burden he was never meant to bear.

5. Legalism believes the saved individual is now capable, with the Holy Spirit's enablement, to work in such a way as to merit divine favor.

The truth is found in John 15:5, "without Him we can do *nothing*." We are not co-laborers or sub-contractors with God, but tools and *only* tools.

6. Legalism fears disobedience because of divine retribution.

The legalist lives in fear of "divine chastisement." Yet we are assured that "perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:18).

7. Legalism believes its judgment of others is infallible.

Legalists delight in putting people into prearranged categories. Judgment is immediate and swift. Everyone and everything is guilty until proven innocent.

8. Legalism places demands on others for conformity to their rules.

The legalist must control through conformity or it will lose its grip. Diversity within unity is the great scourge to the legalist.

9. Legalism judges others based on their appearance.

The legalist believes everyone must mimic them. Yet the infiniteness of God and the diversity of personalities in limitless cultures assure us that there is great multiplicity within the body of Christ.

I have no desire to stand in judgment of the assumed legalist. How tragic it would be for us to embrace grace and, in some twisted way, become legalistic toward those who differ from this fellowship.

Grace living is "riskier" because it means we must take our hands off people and place them into the hands of Almighty God. Yet is such a transfer "risky?" Hardly. I would rather have us live under the watch-care of omnipotence than under the bane-filled eye of impotent man.

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- ¹ See further Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 514, 515 on Antinomianism - different slant.
- ² *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, R.D. Linder's article on "Antinomianism", 57
- ³ *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, R.D. Linder's article on "Antinomianism", 58
- ⁴ *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, R.D. Linder's article on "Antinomianism", 59
- ⁵ Augustus Strong, *Outlines of Systematic Theology*, c1908, 230.
- ⁶ Strong, *Outlines of Systematic Theology*, 230.
- ⁷ http://www.whatsaiththescripture.com/Fellowship/Edit_Antinomianism.html
- ⁸ John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, 240ff.
- ⁹ Renald Showers, *There Really is a Difference*, 188.
- ¹⁰ Wiersbe, *Galatians*, 108-109.
- ¹¹ John Piper, *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, 153-155.