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Law And Gospel

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Amongst a variety of epithets in common use to deprecate the truth of God, we sometimes hear the term Antinomian. It is applied very freely to persons who hold the doctrines of grace, by the enemies of truth, who interpret this term to mean a loose walker, in fact, an immoral person. Antinomian is a compound of two words, Against law, and in this, its primitive meaning, every believer who has realised the power of the gospel, enjoys the privilege in experience of being an Antinomian. The law and the gospel are as opposite as the poles. The law is the ministration of death, the gospel of life. The law shows up man's shortcomings, the gospel discovers the remedy for sin. The law says, do and live; the gospel says, live and do. The law can never satisfy the justice of God, nor the conscience of the sinner; the gospel satisfies both. The law speaks wrath, the gospel whispers peace. The law deprives the sinner of hope and help, the gospel reveals the way of truth and peace. Believers, brought into gospel liberty, see the law magnified and fulfilled by their surety, Christ Jesus, and discern in the gospel of the grace of God provision made for all the wants of the church, both as to salvation and conduct. The moral law discovers our sinful state, and there leaves us. The ceremonial law sets forth in type the gospel, which, revealed to faith, was made plain to the elect in Jewish days. But now that the shadows have fled away, and the true light shineth, we have the rule of faith to walk by – 'the just shall live by faith', and the apostle tells the Church of Galatia, that had apostatised from the gospel as the rule of life, and sought for justification and sanctification by the deeds of the law, 'that to such Christ is become of no effect'. He then exhorts them as to their walk, and tells them, 'if ye be led of the spirit ye are not under the law', and as they had been called to gospel liberty, they were by love to serve another, 'and as many as walk according to this rule, peace be on them, and on the Israel of God' (Galatians 6:16).

In a day like the present of declension from the truth, doctrine is hidden for fear of displeasing professors and alarming the profane, the next step in a wrong direction is to set forth the law as the believer's rule of life. But the gospel not only reviews the way of salvation, but gives precepts and instruction for the believer's conduct, and administers the grace that enables him to walk worthy of the vocation wherewith he is called. God's elect are created in Christ Jesus unto good works; and the rule for life and godliness is not the law, which was a covenant of works, but faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, which works by love both to God and man. 'Love worketh no ill to his neighbour, therefore love is the fulfilling of the law'.

In Neal's History of the Puritans, three men of note in that day were branded as Antinomians – Tobias Crisp, Joseph Tennant, and John Saltmarsh – because they preached faith working by love as the rule of the believer's life, and not the law. From a small volume by the pen of Saltmarsh we have culled the following:

The gospel is both a perfect law of life and righteousness, grace and truth; therefore I wonder that any should contend for the ministry of the law, or ten commandments under Moses, which is of less glory than that which is now revealed, and exceeds in glory; or should strive for the law in preference to the gospel. Nor is the holiness and sanctification by faith, such as is fashioned by the law or outward commandment, but by the preaching of faith, by which the Spirit is given to renew and sanctify the believer, making him a spiritual law of commandments in himself, and his heart, as it were, two tables for the law of love; and though Moses' law be a beam of glory in substance and matter, yet we are not to live by the light of one beam, now the sun of righteousness is risen Himself: that is fit for those that live in the region and shadow of death; it is with the law under the gospel, as it was with the light in the creation, when that which was scattered, was gathered into one body of light: so Christ now being revealed, holiness and righteousness as well as grace and love are revealed in Him and gathered up in Him. And what need we light up a candle for the children of the day to see the sun by? Why strive for a stream in the channel, when the fountain is open? Nor doth it honour the glory of Christ now revealed, to be admiring the light on Moses' face. 'The word is now made flesh, and dwells among us; and we behold, and are to behold His glory', not Moses' glory, 'the glory as of the only begotten Son, full of truth as well as grace.'

The law commands men to obey, to love, to fear, to be holy, that God may be their God, and they His people. The gospel commands us to love and obey, because we are the people of such a God. The law commands us in the power of God as a Lawgiver and Judge, the gospel in the love of a Father. The law commands by promise and threatenings, blessings and cursings; the gospel overcomes by love, gives the power, and then commands, by promises, exhortations, and reasons for duty, rather than threatenings; by setting forth privileges and promises, and power on God's part, and love on Christ's part for us and in us, and in love urges us into doing and working, till love reflects love again. Christ is held forth not only as the surety of His people, but also as their example for obedience. So the gospel is not only the security of the sinner's salvation, but operates as the pattern of love, and by imitation rather than command.

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