

www.ShepherdServe.org

You are welcome to distribute printed copies of this document, or copy and paste this document to distribute via email, as long as the document is unaltered and kept in its *entirety* (including copyright notices), and is not sold for profit. However, if you wish to post this material on your website or anywhere else online, you must first contact us to get permission. ©2008 by David Servant

FIVE

The Antinomian “Christian”

It’s 11:40 Sunday morning at your church. The hymns and choruses have been sung, the offering has been received, and now it’s time for the Scripture reading and sermon. Your pastor walks to the pulpit, opens a large black book, takes a deep breath, and as he swings his arm high up into the air, authoritatively cries out, “A man is justified by *works*, and *not* by faith alone!”

What would be the reaction of most people in your church? Would they be shocked by the pastor’s obvious heresy? Would they be angered by his contradiction of Paul’s writings about salvation, those precious truths rediscovered during the Reformation? Would they label him a legalist? *Or would they realize that he had just read James 2:24?*

Those who would react adversely represent multitudes of professing Christians who are greatly mistaken. Not understanding the nature of saving faith, they suppose that works stand in opposition to faith, whereas, in reality, works are inseparably joined to true faith. As Martin Luther wrote, “It is impossible, indeed, to separate works from faith, just as it is impossible to separate heat and light from fire.”¹

¹ John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 24.

Luther coined a term to describe those who were convinced that, because salvation was a free gift of God's grace, obeying God's laws was unimportant. He called them *antinomians*, the roots of which are *anti*, against, and *nomos*, law.

Today the Protestant church is full of antinomians, and if Luther were alive, he would cry out against its heresy and call for a reformation. He would have no lack of scriptural support for his crusade, because Jesus, Paul, Peter, James, John and Jude all warned against the errors of antinomianism. In fact, Luther would have more scriptures to support his modern cause than he did for the truths of the Reformation. The New Testament's warnings against the errors of antinomianism are much more numerous than against the errors of legalism.

Two Deadly Errors

In Luther's day, the church was entrenched in legalism. Salvation was perceived by most church goers as something to be earned. By purchasing indulgences, viewing relics, doing penance and so on, a person could receive credits that would lessen his future sentence in purgatory by hundreds, even thousands, of years. The gospel had been lost.

While Luther studied the book of Romans, however, he discovered that salvation is a free gift received by faith. He was wonderfully born again, and immediately began challenging his contemporaries with the truths that had set him free. (His faith started working!) A firestorm of controversy was generated, but eventually, through Luther and other reformers' labors, many came to believe in the gospel of God's grace.

But there was an inherent danger in such a gospel, and the reformers knew it. It was possible that God's grace could be conceived as a license to sin. The importance of good works might be neglected, and a new heresy could replace the old one, just as deceptive and damning. Thus the reformers were cautious to proclaim, "It is faith, alone, which saves; but the faith that saves is not alone."

Today, hundreds of years later, what the reformers feared has come upon us. Unlike the legalists of Martin Luther's day, today's church goers don't need to be told that their dead works can't save them. Rather, they need to be told that their dead faith can't save them. Too many have purchased shares of a false

gospel that promise heaven without holiness. The grace in which they trust leads to a license to sin rather than obedience to Christ. Yet Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today and forever, still warns antinomians everywhere, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; *but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven*” (Matt. 7:21, emphasis added).

What is Legalism?

Perhaps no theological term has been more misunderstood and misused as the word *legalism*. Anyone who preaches self-denial, obedience or holiness today is in danger of being wrongly labeled a legalist. How often have professing Christians made statements such as, “I used to attend a very *legalistic* church where the pastor preached against R-rated movies”? Such a pronouncement reveals that the speaker does not really understand what legalism is. Legalism is not holding to a standard of holiness derived from God’s Word. Rather, it is attempting to earn one’s salvation by one’s performance. The legalist doesn’t think He needs Jesus to be saved. He thinks he can save himself. If someone said, “I used to attend a very legalistic church where the pastor preached that we could earn our place in heaven by not viewing R-rated movies,” that would be the correct usage of the term, *legalism*.

The heresy of legalism is that it offers another way of salvation other than the one way that God has provided, through Christ. The folly of the legalist is that he hopes for what is impossible, that he can be good enough to merit heaven. Of course, the possibility of our being good enough to earn our place in heaven ended long ago: the first time God held us accountable for our sin. Theoretically, if a person could live a sinless life, he could get into heaven without the need of a Savior. But because all of us have transgressed, if we’re going to be saved, we need another way of salvation. Obviously that way could only be through God’s grace. The good news of the gospel is that God has extended His grace to us without compromising His standards of holiness through Jesus Christ, our substitute.

Perhaps the best definition of legalism is expressed by the following simple formula:

WORKS ⇨ SALVATION

The arrow should be read, “results in.” The legalist thinks that his works will result in his salvation. Because his heart is unregenerate, void of faith in and love for God, the legalist produces only an outward conformity to the Law as he strives to earn God’s favor.

Another form of legalism can be expressed by the formula:

FAITH + WORKS ⇨ SALVATION

This legalist adds faith and works together, thinking that the combination will insure his salvation. He is trusting, in part, in his works. This was the kind of legalism Paul opposed in his letter to the Galatians.

The biblical formula for the true means of salvation can be expressed:

FAITH ⇨ SALVATION + WORKS

Those who truly believe the gospel are not only saved, but transformed by God’s grace, and manifest God’s work in their lives by their joyful obedience. Unlike the legalist, the true believer’s obedience springs from within, because his heart has been changed.

Finally, antinomianism is conveyed:

FAITH ⇨ SALVATION – WORKS

The antinomian supposes that his faith results in his salvation, even though the validating works of a transformed life are not manifested. Additionally, he often misunderstands at least five other things: (1) the nature of saving faith, (2) God’s intent in saving people, (3) the full work of God’s grace in the lives of those who believe, (4) the Christian’s relationship to God’s law, and (5) the true nature and necessity of repentance. Let’s consider all five of these items in the remainder of this chapter.

The Nature of Saving Faith

The antinomian considers faith to be nothing more than mental acknowledgment. He supposes that his acceptance of certain theological truths constitutes saving faith. Because he *knows* Jesus died on the cross for everyone's sins, and *knows* that salvation is not of works but faith, he thinks he is saved.

Of course, even the devil knows that Jesus died on the cross for everyone's sins. Satan also knows that people are not saved by works but through faith. What would ever make us think that knowing those things makes us righteous in God's eyes?

True saving faith is much more than mental acknowledgment. The Bible defines faith as "the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1, emphasis added). It is believing with one's *heart* that results in salvation (see Rom. 10:10). True faith is always manifested by outward actions.

Antinomians, however, often try to dissect works from faith, even setting them against each other. They piously state, because salvation is purely of God's grace, that they would never look to any of their works to provide assurance of their salvation, lest they "trust in their works."

Yet, as we shall soon see, that is not how Jesus, John the Baptist, the apostle John, Paul, Peter and James thought. For example, John wrote that the love we demonstrate for fellow believers is one of several means whereby we can determine if we are truly born again:

We know [note that word, *know*] that we have *passed out of death into life*, because *we love the brethren*. He who does not love abides in death....But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. *We shall know by this that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before Him*, in whatever our heart condemns us; for God is greater than our heart, and knows all things (1 John 3:14, 17-20, emphasis added).

John believed that our works can assure us of the work of God's grace in our lives. This is vastly different from trusting that one's works are earning him salvation. Our good works are not meritorious—they are validating. They provide additional assurance of our salvation beyond the assurance provided by the promises of the gospel. As we look at the works in our lives, we can say, "Praise God for this evidence of God's grace working in my life!" Our good works have "been wrought in God" (John 3:21).

John also wrote in his first epistle:

No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother (1 John 3:9-10).

Did John believe that the new birth affects how a person lives? Absolutely. Those who are truly born of God practice righteousness and love fellow believers. This is not to say that true believers never sin or always demonstrate perfect love (see 1 John 1:8-9; 4:17-18), but that righteousness and love are dominant characteristics in their lives, unlike those who are not saved, who are characterized primarily by unrighteous behavior and selfishness. John wrote repeatedly in his letter about living righteously and loving fellow believers to provide the assurance of salvation to his readers:

These things [the contents of my letter] I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13, emphasis added).

John believed that professing Christians should examine their lives to gain assurance of God's grace working in them, because he also believed that there is a definite correlation between belief and behavior.

Paul on the Relationship Between Faith and Works

The apostle Paul didn't believe that works and obedience can be divorced from faith, or that these things stand in opposition to one another. Rather, he wrote in the book of Romans of "the obedience of faith" (Rom. 1:5; 16:26). The plain interpretation of that phrase is that faith is characterized by obedience. If I used a phrase, "the obedience of Bob," the clear implication is that Bob demonstrates obedience. If I used the phrase, "the joy of salvation," I would obviously be implying that salvation is characterized by joy. In neither case would I be saying that one serves as a substitute for the other, as antinomians want us to believe that Paul's expression, "the obedience of faith" means that we don't need to have obedience, because faith serves as a great substitute. That would be like saying the expression, "the obedience of Bob" means that I don't need Bob because I have obedience, or, considering the other example, that I don't need salvation because I have joy, a perfectly acceptable substitute.

Paul not only thought the gospel was something to be *believed*, he also considered it something to be *obeyed*. He told the Thessalonian Christians that those who don't "*obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus...will pay the penalty of eternal destruction*" (2 Thes. 1:8-9, emphasis added).²

What is there about the gospel to obey? First, we are commanded by God to believe the gospel, making *believing* an act of obedience (see Mark 1:15). How then can some claim that obedience and faith stand in opposition to one another when believing is an act of obedience?

Second, Jesus commanded people to *repent* and believe the gospel. He also commanded us to preach "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 24:47), and this Paul did, declaring that people "should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance" (Acts 26:20). Repenting is an act of obedience, a response to a divine commandment. Salvation begins in a person's life by an act of obedience that is also an act of faith.

² Peter used the same phrase when writing about the unsaved: "What will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?" (1 Pet. 4:17). Likewise, Luke wrote in his account of the early church that "a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7).

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, commending their “*work of faith* and labor of love” (1 Thes. 1:3, emphasis added). He did not view faith and works as two things that cannot be mixed. Like the apostle James, he also believed that true faith works. He wrote to the Galatian Christians, who were in danger of being seduced into thinking that circumcision was necessary for salvation,

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything, but *faith working through love* (Gal. 5:6, emphasis added).

Like the apostle John, Paul believed that true faith worked through love. Love is a primary fruit of faith. Paul could be paraphrased, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision mean anything; they are human works, but faith starts a divine work in one’s life so that his works of love originate from God.”

Hebrews on Faith

The writer of the book of Hebrews believed that obedience to Jesus Christ is essential to salvation. He wrote,

And having been made perfect, He became *to all those who obey Him* the source of eternal salvation (Heb. 5:9).

Of course, the writer could have also said that Jesus became the source of eternal salvation to all who believe in Him, and he would have been saying the same thing. To him, faith, something he mentioned over thirty times in his letter, naturally produced works. Every one of the “faith heroes” of chapter 11 *did* something because they believed.

In the third and fourth chapters of the book of Hebrews, notice how the writer used the words *unbelief* and *disobedience* synonymously:

And so we see that they [the Israelites] were not able to enter [the promised land] because of *unbelief*...those who formerly had good news preached to them failed to enter because of *disobedience* (Heb. 3:19; 4:6, emphasis added).

Because the majority of the Israelites didn't believe the good news, they didn't obey God. Because they didn't do what God commanded, they proved they didn't believe His promise.

John the Baptist and Jesus on Works

John the Baptist believed there is an inseparable correlation between belief and behavior. Read how he used the words *believe* and *obey* synonymously:

He who believes [*pisteuo*] in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey [*apeitheo*] the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him (John 3:36, emphasis added).

How much clearer could it be? And how can anyone say that it is wrong to examine our lives to determine our spiritual status lest we "trust in our works to save us"? Again, we should examine our works because Scripture is clear that it is quite possible to possess a spurious faith. Trusting in a non-working faith to save us is just as dangerous as trusting that our works will earn us salvation. The only intelligent safeguard against both these dangers is to examine our works for the validation of a true, saving faith.

Jesus also believed that belief affects behavior. He said that those who *believe* in Him would do the same *works* as He did³ (see John 14:12). He foretold that those who "did the good deeds" would enjoy "a resurrection of life," and "those who committed the evil deeds" would suffer "a resurrection of judgment" (John

³ Some maintain that Jesus was only referring to His miracles when He spoke of His works in John 14:11-12. However, the context doesn't necessarily support this view, nor does experience. If all true believers are supposed to be characterized by performing the identical and even greater miracles than Christ performed, there are very few true Christians who have ever lived.

5:29). He also warned that only those who do the will of God will enter heaven, and that true and false believers can be known by their fruits (see Matt. 7:19-23). Unless Jesus was teaching that salvation is earned by works, the only possible correct interpretation of His warning is that saving faith is validated by obedience.

Jesus also warned that only those who do the will of His Father are His brothers and sisters (see Matt. 12:49-50). As we learned in the previous chapter, Jesus often said nothing at all about faith when He called people to salvation. He told seekers to deny themselves, take up their crosses and follow Him lest they forfeit their souls (see Mark 8:34-38). He called people to costly discipleship and sincere submission, a true faith.

Attempting to explain what it meant to believe in Him, Jesus went so far as to tell people that they needed to eat Him (see John 6:47-56), something we are reminded of every time we partake of the Lord's Supper. To believe in Jesus is to become one with Him. The very first act of faith by the new believer, water baptism, is a public declaration of his oneness with Jesus in His death, burial and resurrection.

To believe in Jesus is to join Him: "The one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him" (1 Cor. 6:17). To believe in Jesus is to abide in Him: "Abide in Me, and I in you....If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned" (John 15:4,6). How could a person possess such a unity with Christ and it not affect his behavior?

James on Saving Faith

Perhaps the most classic definition of saving faith, and the one most troublesome to antinomians, is contained in the epistle of James in a passage we've already considered briefly in previous chapters:

What use is it, my brethren, if a man says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him? (Jas. 2:14).

The obvious answer to James' rhetorical question is *No*. Faith without works cannot save.

Even in the light of such obvious truth, modern antinomians would like us to believe that faith without works can save a person. How do they maintain their conviction in spite of what James said? Their explanation of James' teaching is so complex it is highly unlikely that any of his original readers would have been able to understand it. For starters, some antinomians want us to believe that James was not talking about being saved from eternity in hell, but of being saved from a "sinful life of death on this earth."⁴ Supposedly, James was trying to persuade his readers to believe that they had to have works with their faith if they wanted to be saved from a "sinful life of death" on this earth.

The phrase, "a sinful life of death," can only mean a life of sinfulness. And *being saved* from a "sinful life of death on this earth" can only mean living an obedient life, or doing good works. Thus, some antinomians want us to believe that James was correcting a gross error in the theology of his readers: they actually thought they could live an obedient life with a faith that had no works of obedience! Is it possible that James thought his readers were so stupid that they didn't already know what would be self-evident to anyone? And do antinomians really think that we are so stupid to swallow such a far-fetched interpretation of James' clear teaching?

In further refutation of the antinomian argument, we note that the immediate context *before* and *after* James' words about the relationship between faith and works is the subject of future judgment (see Jas. 2:12-13; 3:1). James had eternal salvation in mind, not a temporal earthly salvation from "a sinful life of death."

Faith Working Through Love

⁴ This phrase is a quotation from a letter I received from a person who objected to my interpretation of James 2:14-26. Such ambiguous phrases seem to be the specialty of theologians, who, after politicians and poker players, are some of the world's greatest bluffers. Truly, there is no fog so thick as the fog of theologians.

This particular antinomian interpretation grows more absurd as one continues to read James' words:

If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," and yet you do not give them what is necessary for their body, what use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself (Jas. 2:15-17).

Some antinomians would like us to believe that dead faith is still saving faith; it's just *dead* saving faith as opposed to *living* saving faith. But James has already stated that faith without works can't save anyone, and that is what dead faith is, a faith without works.

It is interesting that the example James used to illustrate dead faith is the picture of a professing Christian who does nothing to help an impoverished brother or sister. Like Jesus, John and Paul, James believed that the fruit of true faith is love for the brethren expressed by meeting pressing needs.

James goes on to write about the impossibility of true faith being void of works:

But someone may well say, "You have faith, and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works." You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless? (Jas. 2:18-20).

As James so rightly states, a person may claim to have faith, but he can't prove he has faith without works. On the other hand, another person may not verbally claim to have faith, but his works say what he doesn't need to claim. Actions speak louder than words. Thus, those who say they have faith that God is one (Deut. 6:4) but have no corresponding actions are fooling themselves. Demons believe that God is one, and they act like they believe it—they shudder! Only "foolish fellows," antinomians all, don't realize that faith without works is absolutely "useless" (Jas. 2:20). That means it is good for nothing.

Abraham's Living Faith

James continues his argument, citing Abraham, who was justified by faith, as an example of a person with living faith:

Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he offered up Isaac his son on the altar? You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," and he was called the friend of God. You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone (Jas. 2:21-24).

How could James have made it more clear? Abraham's faith was a living faith that obeyed God. It was not a faith void of works that justified him, but a faith that was validated by works. James goes so far as to make a statement that, taken out of its context, could be considered heretical: "A man is justified by works, and not by faith alone" (Jas. 2:24).

How do some antinomians attempt to wriggle out of the predicament into which James puts them? They theorize that James did not mean that Abraham was justified before *God* by his works, but before *men*. But this is absurd. Are we to believe that James' readers were convinced that a person could be justified in the sight of men without works, and that James considered their error to be so serious that he wrote to sternly refute them? Could this have really been the issue James addressed?

Notice also that James never said a word about Abraham being justified before men. Additionally, when Abraham almost sacrificed Isaac, there were no other people present to see his act of obedience, that which supposedly justified him in the sight of men. *God*, however, was watching, and He immediately said after Abraham's obedient act,

Now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me....because you have done this thing, and have not

withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice (Gen. 22:12, 16-18).

The whole incident was a test from God (see Gen. 22:1) to see what Abraham would do. Moreover, James said that when Abraham obeyed God, the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Jas. 2:23). Before whom was Abraham reckoned righteous (or justified), God or men? Obviously it was God.

This is not to say that Abraham wasn't reckoned righteous by God years before he almost sacrificed Isaac, as Scripture tells us (see Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3). But Abraham's amazing act of obedience in almost sacrificing his son was indicative of the living faith he possessed from his first moment of faith. Now his faith was being *perfected* by his works. The kind of faith that resulted in Abraham's being declared righteous by God was a true faith, evidenced by his obedience.

Doesn't James Contradict Paul?

But did not Paul write, “a man is justified by faith *apart from works* of the Law” (Rom. 3:28, emphasis added)? Does this not contradict what James said about our being justified by works if he was speaking, as Paul was, of being justified before God?

No, Paul and James were both speaking of being justified before God, and their apparent contradictory statements are not difficult to reconcile. Paul was addressing legalists who considered the Law to be the means of salvation. Paul wanted them to know that salvation can't be earned by anyone's feeble attempt to keep the Law. Salvation is a free gift that has been provided by God's grace and is received by faith.

James, however, was addressing those who had corrupted the truth of salvation by grace through faith, reducing it to a license to sin. Their motto was

“justification by faith alone,” but like modern antinomians, they had redefined faith to be nothing more than a verbal profession, a faith that can be void of any corresponding acts. James wrote to refute that error, wording his explanation so that his point is unmistakable: “You see that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone” (Jas. 2:24). The reason James could make such a statement is because our works demonstrate our faith by which we are justified before God.

Scripture teaches that at certain future judgments, the eternal destinies of individuals will be determined by their works (see Matt. 12:36-37; 25:31-46; John 5:28-29; Rev. 20:12-13). This is because works are what validate faith. So in that sense, as James stated, people’s works justify them before God.

James concludes his teaching on the nature of saving faith by using one more biblical example of a person who was saved by a faith that worked:

And in the same way was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works, when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead (Jas. 2:25-26).

What would have happened to Rahab if she had possessed a faith that was void of works (if such a thing were possible)? She would have perished with everyone else in Jericho. But her living faith stands today as an example for all who would be saved from the wrath of God. Rahab was no antinomian.

Some antinomians like to point to the thief on the cross as an example of a person who was saved by a faith that was void of works. However, they should read Scripture more closely. The repentant thief clearly demonstrated his living faith by his works during the last hours of his life. First, he openly confessed that he was a sinner. Second, he declared that Jesus was innocent and unworthy of death, going so far as to defend Him before the other thief, even rebuking him. Third, without shame he looked to Jesus as the source of salvation and, before a hostile, mocking crowd, publicly asked Him for it (see Luke 23:40-43). Of course, the repentant thief had a very limited opportunity to demonstrate his faith beyond what he did. Still, in just a few minutes, he displayed his faith more than many professing Christians do during their entire lifetime.

A second truth that antinomians often miss is:

God's Intent in Saving People

Long before the New Testament was written and Jesus walked on the earth, God clearly revealed His intent in saving people—He wanted to make them holy. For example, the Lord said through the prophet Jeremiah:

“Behold, days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the Lord, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jer. 31:31-34).

This entire prophecy is quoted in Hebrews 8:8-12, and the writer of Hebrews leaves no doubt as to its application to all new covenant believers.

First, note that God promises to make a new covenant that will be unlike the old covenant (31:31-32). How would it be different? The old covenant was broken by the majority of Israel, but that would not be the case for those under the new covenant. The reason? Because God would do a supernatural work in their lives.

Specifically, He would put His law within them, writing it on their hearts. The result would be that He would be their God and they would be His people (31:33). Under the old covenant, the Lord intended that He would be the God of the Israelites and they would be His people, but it didn't work out that way, because they transgressed the covenant. They didn't obey Him, proving that He

really wasn't their God, and they really weren't His people. Through Jeremiah, however, the Lord promised those under the new covenant that He *would* be their God and they *would* be His people. It would be so because they would obey Him. The source of their obedience would be His work within them.

Forgiven of their sins, everyone under the new covenant would really "know the Lord," another implication of their devoted relationship. John wrote, "And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:3-4). God's intention for us from long ago was that we would truly know Him.

Another similar prophecy that has application to all new covenant believers is found in Ezekiel 36:27. There God promised, "And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances." The result of putting the Holy Spirit within us would be our obedience. If God had only wanted to forgive us, He wouldn't have put His Holy Spirit within us. But He not only wanted to forgive us, He wanted to transform us. He not only wanted to make us legally righteous, He wanted to make us *practically* righteous. He not only wanted Jesus to become like us, He wanted us to become like Jesus. Just as the apostle Paul wrote: "For whom He foreknew [that is us], He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29). This was His intent from the beginning.

A third truth that antinomians often overlook is:

The Full Work of God's Grace in the Lives of Those Who Believe

The previous topic leads well into this one. Antinomians believe in God's grace to forgive us, but fail to realize that God gives much more in His grace. The same grace that forgives us also transforms us.

Grace has been defined as unmerited favor, and so it is. In spite of our rebellion, God has sent His Son to die as a sacrificial substitute and offer us riches beyond measure. We are undeserving of such grace. Yet some have, as Jude said, "turn[ed] the grace of our God into licentiousness" (Jude 1:4). That is, they

consider God's favor to be a license to sin, cheapening what has cost Him so much, continuing on their own path of self-gratification.

This, of course, is not the response God expects from those who have received His grace. He expects that our hearts will be melted as we fall on our faces before Him, ashamed, repentant, and full of gratitude. As Paul wrote, God's grace instructs "us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:12).

Clearly, from the earliest days of the church, there were antinomians, although not labeled as such. Paul refuted antinomian logic and its perverted views of God's grace throughout his letters. For example, He wrote to the Romans:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace might increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? (Rom. 6:1-2).

Here was antinomian logic at its worst: Let us give God more opportunity to extend His grace by continuing in sin! To Paul, the thought of such a course of life is as abhorrent as it is impossible. "How shall we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom. 6:2). Paul appeals to the transforming power of God's grace in the new birth. Those who have truly believed in Jesus have died to sin.

Paul explains in the next few verses exactly how this happens: By virtue of our being in Christ who died and was resurrected, so we too have died and come back to life to "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4). When we died in Christ, sin's power was broken over us. Sin was a spiritual force that held us captive, but now we are no longer sin's slaves because, "he who has died is freed from sin" (Rom. 6:7). Although still capable of being tempted by sin and yielding to it, our situation is not like it was prior to our new birth. Then sin was part of our spiritual nature and had power over us. It was next to impossible, if not impossible, for us to be obedient to God. Now, however, it is *very* possible for us to obey God, and obviously those who have submitted themselves to Christ in obedient faith will act holy now that they are able.

Grace to be Holy

The promise of the good news of God's grace is not only that we can be forgiven, but that we can be made holy. Scripture indicates that there is an initial transformation at the new birth, a work of God that cleans us up dramatically. After that, there is an ongoing work of God in our lives, often called in Scripture *sanctification*. Consider the wonderful message contained within the following scripture:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

Within the Corinthian church, there were former sinners who had previously been bound by some of the most addictive sins known to humanity. But they had been set free and transformed by the Holy Spirit. Isn't it sad that as the grace of God longingly waits to forgive and set free homosexuals, thieves, adulterers and drunkards, the church organizes support groups to help "Christians" understand and cope with their addictions? While God's eternal word testifies of the sin-delivering power of the gospel, the church buys into secular theories and pop psychology. Unlike so many in the church today, Paul was not ashamed of the gospel, because he knew it was "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). The Greek word he used for "salvation," *sozo*, can be translated *deliverance*. God's power in the gospel can deliver anyone of anything.

Yet so much of the church today is either ashamed or ignorant of the delivering power in the gospel. Under the guise of love, sin addicts are "compassionately" told that God in His grace accepts them as they are. It is certainly true that God loves everyone as they are, but He will only accept them if they will believe in His Son and turn from sin. If they do, He will not leave them as they are, but will set them free. I've personally witnessed homosexuals,

alcoholics, drug addicts, fornicators and adulterers be set free from their sin instantly when they repented and called on Jesus. Is God not that powerful? According to 1 Corinthians 6:9-11, He is!

Speaking the Truth in Love

If we really loved people who are bound by sin, we would tell them the truth. Do we think that we are more loving than God as we compassionately counsel people to cope as they continue practicing the sin from which He desires to deliver them? Was Jesus being too harsh when He told the woman who had been caught in adultery, “Go your way. From now on sin no more” (John 8:11)? Should He have been more compassionate and said, “I accept you just as you are. You are obviously a sex addict, and no doubt it has a lot to do with how you were raised as a child. Your actions reveal that you are still longing for the love that your father never gave you. So don’t feel guilty. Guilt can be very damaging to our personalities. I suggest that you go your way and join a support group for recovering sex addicts. With time, I hope that you will be able to overcome your addiction with the help of a higher power.”?

Jesus’ message to all of us, once we’ve encountered Him, is, “Go and sin no more.” By the power of the Holy Spirit in an authentic new birth, sin’s power is broken, making obedience possible. Those who have been truly born again are new creations in Christ (see 2 Cor. 5:17) who can say with certainty, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). God is at work within them, “both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13), and He promises to perfect the good work He began in them (see Phil. 1:6).

As I’ve previously stated, if all God wanted to do was forgive us, He would have never put His Holy Spirit in us. Clearly, at least part of His purpose in giving us the Holy Spirit was to make us holy. God’s grace does more than forgive us—it delivers and transforms us.

A fourth concept that antinomians often misunderstand it:

The Christian’s Relationship to God’s Law

A favorite antinomian expression is, "I'm so glad I'm not under the Law, but under grace." Although this is a biblical expression, the antinomian rips it from its context. He uses it to mean, "I'm so glad that I don't have to be concerned when I commit a certain sin" or, "I'm so glad I don't always have to be worrying about what God approves or disapproves, as they had to under the Law." Such interpretations reveal a grave error in interpreting an important biblical expression.

The New Testament does indeed inform us that those who are in Christ are not "under the Law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:14). However, Scripture makes it very clear that, whatever this expression means, it *does not* mean that those who are under grace have a license to sin. By taking a few scriptures out of context, antinomians force a meaning on a biblical expression that contradicts the whole tenor of Scripture. For example, consider Paul's words in Romans 3:31:

Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.

Clearly, some of what Paul writes in Romans is a defense against a Jewish argument that his gospel of grace would lead people to sin. We can almost hear Paul's antagonists shouting at him: "If people are saved by faith and not by obeying the Law as you say, then you are nullifying God's Law!"

"On the contrary," Paul responded. "You who have been trying to be saved by keeping the Law have never come close to obeying it fully yourselves. But those who have faith in Jesus are born again. God's law is written in their hearts, sin's power is broken over their lives, and they are indwelt by God's Spirit. By virtue of these things and others, they begin keeping the letter *and* spirit of the moral aspects of the Law. Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law."

What Did Paul Mean?

Later in Romans, Paul used the expression under our consideration, “we are not under law but under grace.” But read the context of his statement:

What then? *Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!* Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? (Rom. 6:15-16, emphasis added).

Though we are not under law, this in no way implies that God has given us the liberty to sin. Paul pointed out the incompatibility of such an idea by making reference to what every *true* believer does at the moment of his conversion: He presents himself to God as His obedient slave, and the result is righteousness. The only other alternative available to the human race is to present themselves as slaves to sin, which everyone has done prior to believing in Jesus, and the result is spiritual and eternal death.

The problem is that so many professing Christians have never presented themselves to God as obedient slaves. They’ve heard a gospel that promises them heaven without repentance. Making Jesus Christ Lord is considered an optional step on the sure road to heaven. Surely it must be an optional step, they think, otherwise salvation would not be of grace. Besides, doesn’t the Bible say that we are not under the Law, but grace?

But as Paul so clearly stated, nothing could be further from the truth. Making Jesus Lord is the *only* first step on the road to heaven. Presenting yourself as His obedient slave is the *only* true response of saving faith and the *only* way to receive God’s gift of righteousness.

The Law of Christ

Just because we are not under God’s Law given through Moses does not mean that we are not under God’s laws given through Christ. Paul clearly stated in the above Romans passage that we should not sin. Obviously, if we can be guilty of

sin, there must be a standard to which we are held. Law must exist for sin to exist. “Where there is no law, neither is there violation” (Rom. 4:15).

Under the new covenant, there is a law that is binding upon us. It is not a means of earning salvation because our salvation is of God’s grace. Yet it is obviously meant to be obeyed, otherwise it would not have been given. That law is what Scripture calls the “law of Christ.” The law of Christ includes everything Christ commanded, just as “the Law of Moses” includes everything Moses commanded. Remember that Jesus told us to make disciples, teaching them to obey all His commandments (see Matt. 28:18-20).

Let’s consider another portion of Scripture, where Paul clearly states that he is not under the Law of Moses, but definitely under the law of Christ:

For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. And to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law, *though not being myself under the Law*, that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, *though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ*, that I might win those who are without law (1 Cor. 9:19-21, emphasis added).

How, exactly, does the law of Christ compare with the Law of Moses? A study of Christ’s commandments reveals that, in some cases, He expressly laid aside certain old covenant laws. In other cases, He instituted new laws that did not exist under the old covenant. And in other cases, He explained the spirit of, and endorsed, certain old covenant laws. Let’s consider examples of all three.

An example of the first is Jesus’ abolishing the dietary restrictions of the old covenant. We read in Mark’s Gospel that He “declared all foods clean” (Mark 7:19). We can eat bacon under the new covenant without guilt.⁵

⁵ This truth is endorsed by God’s vision to Peter in Acts 10:10-15 and by Paul’s words in 1 Timothy 4:3-5.

An example of the second was Christ's instituting the commandment of water baptism, something that was not required of any of God's old covenant people (see Matt. 28:19). Jesus also once gave us what He called a *new* commandment, to love one another as He has loved us (see John 13:34).

An example of the third would be Jesus' endorsement of the seventh commandment, the prohibition of adultery. While preaching His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explained the spirit of that prohibition, revealing God's original intent. It seems very likely that many in His audience considered themselves holy so far as adultery was concerned, yet all the while they were habitually lusting in their hearts. But as Jesus indicated, if it is wrong to have a sexual relationship with your neighbor's wife, it is obviously also wrong to mentally undress her.

All of us who are truly in Christ have an obligation, an inward motivation, and the ability to obey the law of Christ. We are under His law. Jesus' commandments embody all the moral requirements of the old covenant law.⁶

Finally, a fifth scriptural concept that antinomians often disregard is:

The True Nature and Necessity of Repentance

Some antinomians completely ignore the New Testament's inclusion of repentance as a necessary requirement for salvation. Some argue that to tell unsaved people that they need to repent is to tell them that their works contribute to their salvation, which amounts to legalism. But this is simply not true. Repentance is indeed a work, but like every other work, it contributes nothing so far as a payment for salvation. Like every other work in the life of a true believer, repentance is a work that follows faith, and is the first work of a living faith. Repentance is the only proper response to the gospel.

Other antinomians, who are a little more knowledgeable of Scripture, realize the claim that repentance should be excluded from gospel preaching is

⁶ In the next two chapters, we will look more closely at the "law of Christ," and how it resembles the law of Moses.

tantamount to saying that the preaching of John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter and Paul was defective. Therefore, their strategy has been to redefine repentance. By their new definition, repentance is no more than a change of mind about Jesus, and one that, amazingly, may not necessarily affect a person's behavior. So let us search for the definition of repentance within the Bible. What did the preachers of the New Testament mean when they called people to repent?

Paul believed that true repentance required not just a change of mind, but a change of behavior. Recounting his initial vision and subsequent ministry of the ensuing decades, Paul testified before King Agrippa,

Consequently, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, *performing deeds appropriate to repentance* (Acts 26:19-20, emphasis added).

John the Baptist also believed that repentance was more than just a change of mind about certain theological facts. He called on his audiences to repent. When they asked him what they should do, he enumerated specific changes of behavior (see Luke 3:3, 10-14). He derided the Pharisees and Sadducees for only going through the motions of repentance, and warned them of hell's fires if they didn't truly repent:

You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore *bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance....the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire* (Matt. 3:7-10, emphasis added).

Jesus preached the same message of repentance as John (see Matt. 3:2; 4:17). He once stated that Nineveh repented at Jonah's preaching (see Luke 11:32). Anyone who has ever read the book of Jonah knows that the people of Nineveh did more than change their minds. They also changed their actions, turning from sin.

What is biblical repentance? It is a willful change of behavior in response to authentic faith born in the heart.

The Necessity of Repentance

How important is repentance? Can a person be saved without repenting? According to Scripture, the answer is *No*.

John the Baptist proclaimed a gospel (and Luke calls it “the gospel”) whose central message was repentance (see Luke 3:1-18). Those who didn’t repent would go to hell (see Matt. 3:10-12; Luke 3:17).

Jesus preached repentance from the start of His ministry (see Matt. 4:17). He warned people that unless they repented, they would perish (see Luke 13:3, 5).

When Jesus sent out His twelve disciples to preach in various cities, “they went out and preached that men should *repent*” (Mark 6:12, emphasis added).

After His resurrection, Jesus told the twelve to take the message of repentance to the whole world, because it was the key that opened the door to forgiveness:

And He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that *repentance* for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47, emphasis added).

The apostles obeyed Jesus’ instructions. When the apostle Peter was preaching on the day of Pentecost, his convicted listeners, after realizing the truth about the Man whom they had recently crucified, asked Peter what they should do. His response was that they, first of all, should repent (see Acts 2:38).

Peter’s second public sermon at Solomon’s portico contained the identical message. Sins would not be wiped away without repentance:⁷

⁷ Likewise, when God revealed to Peter that Gentiles could be saved simply by believing in Jesus, Peter declared to Cornelius’ household, “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and *does what is right*, is welcome to Him” (Acts 10:34b-35, emphasis added). Peter also declared in Acts 5:32 that God gave the Holy

Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away (Acts 3:19a, emphasis added).

As we have already learned from Paul's testimony before King Agrippa, his gospel always contained the message of repentance. In Athens, Paul warned his audience that everyone must stand in judgment before Christ, and those who have not repented will be unprepared for that great day:

Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that *all everywhere should repent*, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31, emphasis added).

In his farewell sermon to the Ephesian elders, Paul listed repentance along with faith as an essential ingredient of salvation:

I did not shrink from...solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of *repentance* toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:20a, 21; emphasis added).

The writer of the book of Hebrews said that "repentance from dead works" is the most fundamental doctrine of Christ (see Heb. 6:1).

Hopefully, this list of scriptural proofs is enough to convince anyone that a relationship with God begins with repentance. *There is no forgiveness of sins without it*. If you did not repent when you first "accepted Jesus," performing "deeds appropriate to repentance," you were not saved. If you have not repented since then, you are still not saved.

Spirit "to those who obey Him." All true Christians are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (see Rom. 8:9; Gal. 4:6).

Of What Does God Expect Us to Repent?

When a person first believes the gospel, he should initially repent of all known sin. Of course, he can't repent of everything he does that's wrong because he doesn't know everything he is doing that's wrong. God holds us accountable only for what we know (see Luke 23:34; 1 Tim. 1:13). As the new believer grows in his understanding of God's will (see Eph. 5:10), there will be ongoing repentance. That is the process of sanctification.

In some cases, there will be a need to make restitution and/or ask forgiveness for previous wrongs. Obviously, if a person stole twenty dollars yesterday, believes in Jesus today, and still keeps the stolen money, he is still a thief. He has in his possession what belongs to another. How can he claim to be a follower of Christ? The conscience of a true new believer will not allow him rest until he returns what he has stolen.

Of course, some wrongs are impossible to make right. But every stolen item that can be returned should be. Every wrong that can be righted should be. Letters may need to be written or phone calls made, asking forgiveness from offended parties.

If every professing Christian in the world would repent, it would cause a revolution.

Legalism and *antinomianism*—two words that describe equally fatal theologies. Which of these two words have you heard more often spoken from the lips of professing Christians? How many of them have never even heard of antinomianism? Although the New Testament warns against antinomianism many more times than it does against legalism, antinomianism remains the prevailing theology in many modern Protestant circles.

Antinomians often mistakenly speak of authentic Christians as legalists. Authentic Christians don't mind though, because unlike antinomians, they expect persecution, knowing that, "Indeed, all who desire to *live godly* in Christ Jesus *will be persecuted*" (2 Tim. 3:12, emphasis added). They seek praise from God rather than man, looking forward to the day when they will hear their Lord say, "Well done, *good and faithful slave*; you were faithful...enter into the joy of

your *master*" (Matt. 25:21, emphasis added). It is only those who have been good and faithful to their *Master* who will enter into His joy.