

# Persistent and Deadly “ISMS” – Antinomianism

*“Now, we know that the law is good as long as one uses it correctly.”*  
(1 Timothy 1:8, Evangelical Heritage Version)

Some time back, I wrote a newsletter mini-series about “isms.” This month and the next I’m expanding this look at “isms” to include two more. These two “isms” have existed for a long time and have confused Christians. They are *antinomianism* and *moralism*. And because both of these “isms” are false teachings about God’s Law, they are sort of two different sides of the same error laden coin. I will be using the words above from the Apostle Paul’s letter to Pastor Timothy in addressing these two “isms” – stressing the first part of this verse in this month’s article and focusing on the second half of this verse next month.

So, let us begin with the false teaching of antinomianism. In dissecting this long word that may be unfamiliar to many, it’s worth pointing out that at the heart of it is the Greek word “nomos,” which means law. And at the beginning of this “ism” is the word “anti,” which means against. Antinomianism is the teaching that the Law of God is no longer necessary in the life of God’s people (His church) who have been saved by grace and are now *“a new creation” “in Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:17a, ESV)*. And this false teaching existed at the time of the early Christian church and also understandably reared its ugly head at the time of the Reformation. And I say “understandably” because the recovery of the Biblical teaching about God’s grace understandably resulted in many Christians rejoicing in the freedom of the Good News that their sins have been removed by Christ as a free and undeserved gift. They had been embondaged by the legalism (another false teaching about the Law) of the Roman church. But sadly, the excitement over God’s emancipating Gospel message led some to wrongly conclude that the Ten Commandments were no longer necessary for Christians.

But Martin Luther disagreed. And for good reason. For many Scriptural passages debunk antinomianism. In fact, St. Paul, a beloved preacher of salvation by grace through faith who was quoted often by Luther and the 16<sup>th</sup> century reformers, renounced antinomian teaching. He did so in his words (quoted above) to Timothy: *“Now, we know that the law is good.”* This same apostle also told the Galatians: *“Is the law then contrary to the promises of God? Certainly not! For if a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law” (Galatians 3:21, ESV)*.

See, the Law and the Gospel are distinct teachings. And the Law always kills the sinner. This isn’t because the Law of God is evil but because you and I cannot keep the Commandments as God requires. We are corrupt and dead sinners by nature. The Law’s function is not to deliver us from sin, Satan, or the grave. Jesus came to accomplish our salvation. And the Gospel is the

liberating and life-giving message of what Jesus did for us by His life, suffering, and death. So, while obedience to the Law is not necessary for us to be saved (Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8-9), yet we are to obey God's Law. Are we to do so to earn salvation or to keep ourselves in the faith? No! We keep the Law because God tells us to do so. This is what antinomianism gets wrong. And sadly, the false teaching of antinomianism is still around today. So, it remains a threat. Some pastors in the LCMS are even saying that they fear that this false teaching has infected some of the preaching within our own church body.

So, let's review the three uses that God's Law has for us Christians – uses that you undoubtedly were taught in catechism class. As you recall, the first use of the Law is to “curb” sinful and rebellious behavior. And one doesn't have to be a believer in God to understand that this use of the Law exists and works effectively. For even fallen reason understands that the threat of punishment and the distribution of punishment affects behavior. And there certainly is a need for the Law to do this in our world today. Why? Well, as the Apostle Paul writes: ***“The law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:9-10, ESV).*** Sound familiar? And referring to these words, we are reminded in the *Lutheran Confessions*: ***“Yet this is not to be understood in a simplistic way, as though the justified are to live without Law.... If God's believing and elect children were completely renewed in this life by the indwelling Spirit, so that in their nature and all its powers they were entirely free from sin, they would not need any law. They would need no one to motivate them, either.... However, believers are not renewed in this life perfectly or completely. Their sin is covered by Christ's perfect obedience, so that it is not charged against believers for condemnation.... Nevertheless, the old Adam still clings to them in their nature and all its inward and outward powers.... Because of these fleshly lusts, God's truly believing, elect, and regenerate children need the daily instruction and admonition, warning, and threatening of the Law in this life” (The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article 6, Lines 5, 6, 7, and 9. Quoted from Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions, Second Edition, Concordia Publishing House, ©2005, 2006, pp. 558-559).***

The second use of God's Law is that it serves as a “mirror” – showing us our sin and need for forgiveness. For when the Ten Commandments, truly and fully understood, stand before your eyes and mine, an honest examination ought to make it clear that we fall far short every day of what God expects of us. For we break God's Law in our actions, speech, thoughts, and desires. For although Christians are saints in God's eyes through Christ, yet they are simultaneously sinners as they journey through this world. Therefore, you and I ought to repent daily. And the Law, which shows all of us (even Christians) our sins, points out our need to confess our sins – acting as a “mirror.” For as St. Paul said: ***“What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, ‘You shall not covet’” (Romans 7:7, ESV).***

And the Law of God also has a third use – namely, as a guide or rule. And this use is especially meaningful for Christians because we believe God’s Word to be true, and therefore trust that His moral Law is unchanging and always reliable. For Christians understand that obedience to God’s Law cannot save them – for it is not the function of the Law to save us. We are saved by Christ’s grace alone, which is revealed in Holy Scripture alone, and is received through the gift of faith alone. God’s deliverance is a free and undeserved gift. All glory and praise be to Christ. Nevertheless, believers are told to love God and neighbor as they journey on this side of Heaven. And even though the old sinful nature still clings to Christians in this world, yet through their Baptism into Christ, they are also given a new nature in this life. Therefore, Christians now have a desire to please God. And the Law instructs us how to love God and neighbor. For God wants us to do good works. Even the famous preacher of salvation by grace through faith, St. Paul, clearly encourages us to do so in passages like Ephesians 2:10 and Titus 3:8. And God’s Word serves as our guide in loving Him and our neighbor. As we pray in the great psalm on God’s Word: ***“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105, ESV).***

My sisters and brothers in Christ, antinomianism is not taught in the Bible – Old Testament or New Testament. In fact, Holy Scripture teaches the opposite. For even though it always accuses us, yet the Law of God has a holy and divine purpose in the lives of God’s people (His church) in this world. Antinomianism is an extreme misunderstanding that contradicts the teachings of God’s Word. But going to the extreme of seeing God’s Law as the main or only thing offered in the Bible is also a very deadly false teaching. And we’ll look at that “ism” next month.

See you at worship,  
Pastor