

# THE BRITISH ANTINOMIAN CONTROVERSIES<sup>1</sup>

JONATHAN W. ARNOLD

Pastor  
*Skiff Lake Bible Church*  
Clarklake, MI

But I see the corrupting Design is of late, grown  
so high, that what seemed these Thirty Four  
Years suppressed, now threatneth as a torrent  
to overthrow the Gospel.

—Richard Baxter,  
'Defence of Christ' (sig. A3v)<sup>2</sup>

## I. INTRODUCTION

With an indignant cry of frustration, the eminent Presbyterian leader, Richard Baxter (1615-1691), announced to the theological world his surprise at what he believed to be the return of a controversy which he and his colleagues had attempted to quell some three decades prior. Baxter's frustration was aroused by the 1690 re-publication of a collection of sermons written by Tobias Crisp (1600-1643), a London theologian who had been branded an antinomian during the first outbreak of the controversy. This particular publication, entitled *Christ alone exalted*, included previously unpublished sermons which had been collected by his son, Samuel, along with a letter signed by twelve

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<sup>1</sup>Editor's Note: This article does an outstanding job explaining the history and theology of the British antinomian controversies. The author is not in this article advocating a theological position. He is merely reporting what happened.

<sup>2</sup>In order to remain as true to the original authors as possible, all quotations conform to their original spelling, including capitalization. Two observations should be made on this point. 1. At this point in history, the 'v' was not used regularly. Often, as in many of the quotations in this paper, a 'u' served the same function. 2. Spelling of words was not uniform, so many quotations will have the same word spelled differently. These have not been noted as mistakes since they were part of the accepted practice of the day.

leaders of London dissent intended to certify the authenticity of the new sermons included in this publication. In reality, this letter of certification was received more like a commendatory letter and launched the first volley in what would become a bitter fight over this strain of antinomianism. Significantly, that letter also signaled—to Baxter’s pronounced horror—that the antinomianism which he had attempted to marginalize in the first half of the century had made headway into the prominent leadership of London dissent.<sup>3</sup> Even at that point of the nascent second controversy—as modern scholarship has chosen to name this late-eruption—the juxtaposition of the core aspects of this debate with those from the earlier debates appears much more stark than most modern scholarship has admitted.

## II. THE ORIGINAL CONTROVERSY

That being said, Baxter’s fears were completely understandable. The controversy which had raged since at least the 1630s and which had been quieted in the mid-1650s had, at times, become quite heated. As David Como has ably shown, the vast majority of those labeled *antinomians* during that original British controversy had been closely identified with the Puritan movement. As such, those theologians posed an imminent and internal threat to the very existence of the godly congregations in Laudian England. Thus, a clear line of demarcation proved essential in order to demonstrate the orthodoxy of the more mainstream Puritans and thereby, hopefully, avoid further persecution. This at least partly explains the polemical aspect of the debate which somewhat devolved into egregious attempts to dismiss opponents simply through branding. With the fall of the Laudian regime and the development of the unique milieu which was the English Civil Wars—complete with the accompanying *de facto* freedom of religion and the realization that ‘every ignorant, empty braine (which usually hath the highest esteem of it selfe) hath the liberty of the Presse, whereby...the number of bookes is grown so great that they begin with many to grow

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the polemical issues involved in the antinomian controversy, see Cooper, *Fear and Polemic* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

contemptible<sup>4</sup>—the free grace theologies which were collectively labeled antinomian spread quickly and with surprising ferocity.

At that point, the politically expedient move of the 1630s became a theological necessity in the minds of the Puritan leaders, if not in reality. Invigorated by the dangers of the original Protestant antinomian controversy (involving Martin Luther and Johannes Agricola); the ever-present horrors of the Münster uprising which had antinomian undertones; and even the perceived anarchist threat of the concurrent, colonial antinomian controversy centered on the teachings of Anne Hutchinson; the mainstream Puritans were galvanized in their response to these doctrines which, at least in their minds, inevitably led to radical licentiousness. But, it must be noted, those doctrines labeled *antinomian* in the first half of the seventeenth century were varied, ranging from the spiritualist teachings of John Traske (c. 1585-1636) and John Everard (1584?-1640/1) to the imputed righteousness view exemplified by the teachings of John Eaton (1574/5-1630/1) and covering a host of variations in between. Consequently, the term *antinomian* became a useful catchall for any teaching which did not align with the then-characteristic Puritan view of pietistic preparationism. Despite its usefulness as a polemical weapon, the term did largely identify a single fundamental tenet which united the various antinomian views, namely, an emphasis (or over-emphasis) on justification by faith alone, or *solafideism*, to the expense of cooperation from the believer.

Motivated by fears—both real and imagined, but almost always exaggerated—of a heretical coup, the response from those representing orthodoxy in that first controversy had been swift and heavy-handed, if only in words. Combined with numerous other animated repudiations of these teachings, the footnotes in that quintessential argument against toleration, the catalog of heresies entitled *A testimony to the trueth of Jesus Christ* (1648), forcefully condemned the collected teachings of any who appeared to hold to that “grossest Blasphemy,”<sup>5</sup> that “most dangerous Doctrine.”<sup>6</sup> Following the publication of that catalog,

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<sup>4</sup> Baxter, *Aphorismes of justification* (London: printed for Francis Tyton, 1649), sig. a2v.

<sup>5</sup> Baillie, *Dissuasive* (London: printed for Samuel Gellibrand, 1645).

<sup>6</sup> Bedford, Field and Stephens, *Examination* (London: Printed by John Field for Philemon Stephens, and are to be sold at his shop at the sign of the

Richard Baxter entered the foray of the controversy—joining the likes of Thomas Gataker (1574-1654), Thomas Bakewell (b. 1618/19), and Samuel Rutherford (1600?-1661)—with the first edition of his *Aphorismes of justification* (1649), a work intended to encourage Baxter’s congregation at Kidderminster in their understanding of “the most fundamentall, undoubted, and practicall Truths”<sup>7</sup> and, thereby, to undermine the very “frame and fabrick of *Antinomianisme*.”<sup>8</sup> At that point, however, the actual identification of those teachings labeled antinomian remained very much in dispute.

### A. JUSTIFICATION: THE FOCAL POINT OF THE DEBATE

Around the advent of the first controversy, the future Bishop of Norwich and religious controversialist, Richard Montagu (bap. 1575, d. 1641), observed not only that “Faith without Charity doth not iustifie” but also that this maxim could be heard “in euery Protestants mouth.”<sup>9</sup> While this observation may have appeared true at first glance, the spread of the free grace theologies called its veracity into question. Indeed, the usual view of justification, exemplified by Montagu’s observation and heard regularly throughout the English theological landscape, could be summarized by the simple Latin phrase *fides solum iustificat, non autem fides sola* (faith alone justifies, but not faith which is alone). Thus, the theological landscape pre-conditioned the English theologians to focus on the personal acts of charity which accompanied saving faith. Importantly, most theologians held that the law functioned to identify those acts of charity. Thus, anyone who was perceived to downplay the role of works of charity could be seen as heterodox, at best.

For the most part, the original antinomian controversy divided the English Protestant theological landscape in two: those who emphasized a monergistic view of salvation, the antinomians, and those who emphasized a more-synergistic view.

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gilded Lyon in Pauls Church-yard., 1647), sig. Bv.

<sup>7</sup> Baxter, *Aphorismes* [1649], sig. a9v-r. It should be noted that this work was written in response to John Owen. This served to include Owen in the group of those labeled ‘antinomian’ even without being direct with the charge.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, app. 164.

<sup>9</sup> Montagu, *Gagg for the New Gospell?* (London: printed by Thomas Snodham for Matthew Lownes and William Barret, 1624), 145.

Of course, any dichotomous rendering necessarily results in an oversimplification. Certainly, Edward Fisher (*fl.* 1626-1648) illustrated well the potential poles of the spectrum with his characters: *Nomista*, the Legalist, who remains “ignorant of Christ and his Righteousnes, and therefore establisheth his own” by being “a zealous professour of Religion,”<sup>10</sup> and *Antinomista*, the Antinomian, who “glorif[ies] and rejoyc[es] in free grace, and justification by faith alone,” who “can talke like believers, and yet do[es] not walke like believers, who is ‘not obedient to the Law of Christ.’”<sup>11</sup>

In the end, the actual debate comprising the first controversy took a predictable course. In general, those branded as *antinomian* focused intensively on the imputed nature of Christ’s righteousness, seeking to minimize the role of the law in the life of the believer. To varying degrees, then, these theologians proclaimed “true Christian Liberty...to such as truly beleeeue.” “[T]his Libertie,” according to Traske, “is a freedome from the Law, from Sinne, and so from Hell, and all feare of condemnation...[being] diuorced from the flesh, and so free from it...”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Eaton and Crisp could agree with Saltmarsh when he argued that “[th]e *Spirit of Christ* sets a *beleever* as *free* from *Hell*, the *Law*, and *bondage* here on *Earth*, as if he were in *Heaven*; nor wants he any thing to *make* him *so*, but to make him *beleeeve* that he is *so*...”<sup>13</sup>

This view did not preclude the use of the law in the church age, particularly for the unconverted but even for the believer. Even the spiritualist Traske allowed that the “Morall Law...serues still to conuince all men, of sinne, and to bring them to Christ, for perfect obedience, and full satisfaction.”<sup>14</sup> John Eaton, in his work *The Discovery of the most dangerous dead faith* (1641), went to great lengths to note the importance of the law in teaching, identifying, and convicting of sin. He even argued

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<sup>10</sup> Fisher and Hamilton, *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (London: printed by R. Leybourn, for Giles Calvert, at the Black Spread-Eagle, at the West end of Pauls, 1646), sig. 7v.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, sig. Ar.

<sup>12</sup> Traske, *Treatise of Libertie* (London: Printed by W. Stansby, for N. Butter, and are to be sold at his shop, at the signe of the pyde Bull, neere S. Austens gate, 1620), 6-7.

<sup>13</sup> Saltmarsh, *Free grace* (London: Printed for Giles Calvert, 1646), 140.

<sup>14</sup> Traske, *Treatise of Libertie*, 18.

that the law aided in the “deeper fight of this evil of sin.”<sup>15</sup> For his part, Crisp claimed that, for the believer, “the law continues for a rule, and to point out the wrath due for transgressions.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Crisp even saw the law serving as a sort of preparation for salvation, “to hunt men into Christ.”<sup>17</sup>

These concessions to the continued use of the law did nothing to assuage the orthodox opposition who balked at any minimization of the law, having seen the radical licentiousness (real or imagined) which necessarily followed on that short and very slippery slope. The fight, then, required controverting almost every point of the antinomian doctrine of justification. Thus, Rutherford argued that “Christ, and his Apostles, presse the morall Law upon the *Gentiles*,”<sup>18</sup> demonstrating not only its continued use in the conversion of sinners but also its continued authority over the believers as well, since the Law-giver was one and the same. In that view, “*the Law is yet to be preached, as tying us to personall obedience...*”<sup>19</sup> Henry Burton concurred, averring that the law “remains as a perepetualle rule of a holy life to all God’s people to the end of the world.” This defense of the continued use of the law had the potential, as J. Wayne Baker has noted, to equate “the moral law with the gospel.”<sup>20</sup> When dissected, however, these statements sounded remarkably like the concessions to the law made by the so-called antinomians.

## B. THE CORE OF THE DISAGREEMENT

While the differing views of the law served as a convenient line of demarcation between these two loosely-defined groups, that issue was merely the symptom rather than the root of the problem. Numerous differences between the two sides—beyond

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<sup>15</sup> Eaton, *Discovery* (London: printed by J. Hart; and sold by John Lewis; at the French Church, in Grey Eggle Street; at a Meeting in Peter’s Yard; at the French Chapel, in Hermitage Street; and by Stephen Dixon at Barton, in Leicestershire, 1747), 37.

<sup>16</sup> Crisp, *Christ alone exalted* (London: printed for and sold by G. Keith, 1755), 590.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 590.

<sup>18</sup> Rutherford, *Survey of the spirituall antichrist* (London: Printed by J.D. & R.I. for Andrew Croke, and are to be sold at his shop at the Green-Dragon in Pauls Church-yard, 1648), 6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>20</sup> Baker, ‘Sola Fide, Sola Gratia: The Battle for Luther in Seventeenth-Century England’, *Sixteenth Century Journal* 16 (1985), 119.

their respective views of the law—could be enumerated, and, indeed, were. The 1644 anonymous *Declaration against the Antinomians* identified seven “chief Tenents” held by the antinomians:

- I. That God doth never inflict punishment upon the Elect for their sins.
- II. That God is never angry with his children.
- III. That God sees no sin in those that are his.
- IV. That such as are elected, are at all times beloved of God; in what condition soever they be, be they never so great sinners, yea, in the very act of sinne it self.
- V. That sanctification of life in duties of Piety, is nothing at all esteemed of God.
- VI. That the godly finde no difficulties in the way to Heaven, but live in much pleasure and delight in this world.
- VII. That those who belong to God, are able in this world presently to distinguish betwixt Gods people and the wicked.

In his *Confession of his Faith* (1654), Baxter identified forty tenets of the antinomian teaching with which he disagreed and an astounding one hundred errors made by the antinomians. All of those teachings could indeed be found among the collected writings of those charged with this particular heresy—especially given the fact that much of the antinomian writings could be aptly described as, using J. I. Packer’s words, “rhapsodic and incoherent.”<sup>21</sup> By the end of the first controversy, an end which was precipitated by the 1655 publication of Baxter’s *Aphorismes of Justification*, however, Baxter focused his opposition to antinomianism on two main themes: the idea of the strict imputation of Christ’s passive and active righteousness and eternal justification.<sup>22</sup> By narrowing the focus, Baxter helped identify the core of the debate—even though he did so with an uncanny aversion to succinctness.

As can be seen from Baxter’s focus, the title given to both the controversy itself and the participants in the controversy did not fit precisely. The real point of contention between the two sides stemmed less from their view of the law—though clearly

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<sup>21</sup> Packer, *The Redemption & Restoration of Man* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 202.

<sup>22</sup> Baxter, *Aphorismes of Justification* (Hague: printed by Abraham Brown, 1655), 31-7, 43-7.

disagreement on that issue did exist—and more from their view of justification and their definition of justification by faith. Ultimately, the disagreement rested on two specific issues which loosely related to Baxter’s own narrow focus: the understanding of the conditionality of the covenant (whether or not faith was required as a condition of the covenant) and the *ordo salutis* (the order of salvation).

### C. THE CONDITIONALITY OF THE NEW COVENANT

The antinomians—almost to a person—held to an unconditional new covenant. On this issue, Tobias Crisp provided one of the clearest statements of the typical antinomian view:

I say, *the New Covenant* is without any conditions whatsoever on mans part. Man is tied to no condition, that he must performe, that if he doe not perform, the Covenant is made voide by him.<sup>23</sup>

John Saltmarsh forcefully agreed with Crisp, claiming that “[t] he Gospel hath in it no moral condition of any thing to be done of us.”<sup>24</sup> Even Traske, who focused extensively on the need for faith to be present in a believer in order to be free from the law, noted that the believer has moved from “conditionall Promises” to “free Promises.”<sup>25</sup> Or, according to Eaton, the benefits of the covenant are realized by the believer “objectively and passively...being no agents and doers in this businesse, but meere patients.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, the view that, in some form or another, God justified believers without human conditions comprised a common aspect of the teachings of those labeled antinomian. After all, the requirement of human conditions for participation in the covenant would render the reception of Christ “a bargain and sale” rather than a gift.<sup>27</sup>

This stance on the unconditional nature of the new covenant influenced the view of faith in the antinomian teaching. By definition, faith, inasmuch as it could be said to be *of the*

<sup>23</sup> Crisp, *Christ alone exalted*, 159.

<sup>24</sup> Saltmarsh, *Free grace*, 207.

<sup>25</sup> Traske, *Treatise of Libertie*, 14.

<sup>26</sup> Eaton, *The Honie-combe of Free Justification* (London: printed by R.B. at the charge of Robert Lancaster, 1642), 25.

<sup>27</sup> Crisp, *Christ alone exalted* (London: 1643), 64.



*believer*, could not be a condition of an unconditional covenant. This understanding naturally led to the view of the imputation of Christ's passive and active righteousness which caused Baxter such consternation. Any fulfillments of the old covenant or conditions for entry into the new covenant had to have been completed by Christ and imputed to the believer. Thus, Eaton could argue that "the perfect holinesse and righteousnes...of the humane nature of Christ wherein he performed perfect obedience, both active and passive in fulfilling the whole law of God, is the formall cause of our Justification."<sup>28</sup>

The response from the opposition, rooted as it was in the prevalent preparationist teaching of the day, took exception to the idea that the new covenant required nothing, including faith, of its participants. These exceptions were bolstered by the relatively recent shift in the theological understanding of a covenant—"a mutual agreement between two or more persons to do or refrain from doing certain acts"<sup>29</sup>—being distinct from a testament—"a formal declaration of will".<sup>30</sup> In this view, the new covenant was indeed a mutual agreement with requirements for all parties involved. At the least, the human participant in the new covenant needed to fulfill the requirement of faith. In fact, at its core, Christ's salvific work on the cross and at the resurrection could be found in His purchasing a new covenant with relaxed requirements. To use Baxter's words, the new covenant which Christ purchased required simply the "sincerity only of our faith and obedience"<sup>31</sup> rather than the perfect obedience required by the old covenant. Likewise, Edward Norrice (1584-1659) relied on the conditional aspect of the gospel as a weapon against John Traske and his like-minded theologians to highlight the necessity of human fulfillment of the conditional aspect

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<sup>28</sup> Eaton, *The Honie-combe of Free Justification*, 262-3. It should be noted that the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and, even more explicitly, the *Savoy Declaration of Faith* both supported this antinomian view of imputed passive and active righteousness. See Art. XI.

<sup>29</sup> *OED online*, 'covenant, n.', accessed Nov. 16 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Weir, *The Origins of Federal Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 52, 58. Note the shift in English translations from the use of the term *testament* to *covenant* as a translation of the Hebrew בְּרִית and the Greek διαθήκη.

<sup>31</sup> Baxter, *Apology* (London: printed by A.M. for Thomas Underhill...and Francis Tyton, 1654), 45. See Arnold, 'The Reformed Theology of Benjamin Keach (1640-1704)', DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 2009 [2010], 182-84.

of the covenant.<sup>32</sup> Stephen Lobb also highlighted the necessity of human faith as a condition of participating in the covenant of grace. Despite Baxter's acquiescence to some form of imputed active righteousness, this side of the controversy constantly held that all the necessary conditional aspects of the covenant had to be fulfilled by the human participant.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the strict imputation of Christ's active righteousness could not be true.

In his rejoinder against the antinomian view of the unconditional covenant, Samuel Rutherford provided a glimpse of the type of pedantic arguments that could stem from this discussion. Rutherford ceded ground to Tobias Crisp, allowing that faith and good works, indeed, "are not the meritorious, the efficient cause or way, nor the formall covenant-condition" by which a person participates in the new covenant.<sup>34</sup> However, in almost the same stroke of the pen, he argued that good works were indeed "conditions without which wee cannot bee saved".<sup>35</sup> The difference, for Rutherford, could be found in the definition of *condition*. A condition could either be seen as a formal cause or as a coincidental occurrence. The latter applied to good works and faith regarding the covenant, while the former did not. However, Crisp, et al., would have nothing of this argument, denying any human condition which could be seen as necessary in order for the covenant to be fulfilled. Those necessary conditions simply served to make salvation achievable by works rather than by free grace.

#### D. THE ORDO SALUTIS

The fact that the antinomian controversy largely hinged on the conditionality of the new covenant had natural repercussions for the respective understandings of the *ordo salutis*. If faith could not be seen as a condition of the covenant, as the so-called antinomians argued, justification must occur without faith. Or, in other words, justification must precede faith in the *ordo*. Indeed, the antinomians recognized this logical necessity,

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<sup>32</sup> Norris, *A treatise* (London: Printed [by Augustine Mathewes] for Robert Milbourne at the Vnicorne neere Fleet bridge, 1636).

<sup>33</sup> Baxter, *Catholick Theologie* (London: printed by Robert White for Nevill Simmons...1675), I.ii.87.

<sup>34</sup> Rutherford, *Survey of the spirituall antichrist*, 39.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

and, for the most part, owned it as their doctrine. Thus, Crisp confidently averred that “Christ doth justifie a person before he doth believe.”<sup>36</sup> Likewise, Saltmarsh, quoting the controversialist and Church of England clergyman, Thomas Rogers (d. 1616), noted that all works, including faith, “done before Justification please not God.”<sup>37</sup>

This view of the *ordo* allowed Crisp to defend the idea that God justified the elect from eternity past. Justification for all the elect, he argued, occurred at once. Thus, “the elect child in the womb,” just like “those now in glory,” “had their first purity in the womb.”<sup>38</sup> David Como has documented a similar vein in the teachings of Richard Rothwell who claimed that “all the elect...are justified, sanctified and in the womb.”<sup>39</sup>

Logic also dictated the theology of those who opposed the antinomians. Stephen Lobb voiced this viewpoint well when he argued that:

Faith, and *this union* [with Christ] is in *order of nature antecedent* to an *actual imputation of Christs Righteousness*, and consequently, *before our actual Justification in the sight of God.*<sup>40</sup>

On this issue, Lobb alertly cited John Owen in support, claiming that Owen argued that justification requires faith “as *antecedent* to our actual Justification in God’s sight.”<sup>41</sup> In his typical manner, Baxter complicated the issue by delineating between pardon and justification, holding that the former immediately follows faith and begins the process resulting in the latter.<sup>42</sup> For the matter at hand, the complexities of Baxter’s view need not be parsed. The relevant issue is the fact that, according to him, pardon preceded justification and both were precipitated by faith. Baxter provided some final clarity for this controversy when, in his *Confession* [sic], he explicitly noted

<sup>36</sup> Crisp, *Christ alone exalted*, 168.

<sup>37</sup> Saltmarsh, *Free grace*, 209.

<sup>38</sup> Crisp, *Christ alone exalted*, 553.

<sup>39</sup> Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 205, citing Bodleian Tanner MS 72, fol. 129r.

<sup>40</sup> Lobb, *The Glory of free grace* (London: printed by T. S. for B. Alsop, at the Angel and Bible against the stocks-market, 1680), 75.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, app. xviii.

<sup>42</sup> Baxter, *Universal Redemption* (London: printed for John Salusbury, 1694), 32.

that “conversion and believing” necessarily came before justification.<sup>43</sup> These noteworthy publications neither served as the climax of this controversy nor as the final blow. However, the opponents of antinomianism did appear to gain the upper hand in the printed debate around this time with the onslaught of publications ending in the mid 1650s.<sup>44</sup> At that point, Baxter evidently considered the controversy to be settled.

Clearly, the issues on the table moved far beyond the mere discussion of the continued use of the law, as the name of the controversy suggests. Although the differing sides reached no agreement, the disputed views of the conditionality of the covenant and the *ordo salutis* took a backseat to other, more pressing matters, such as the soon to be passed *Act of Uniformity* (1662). As has been seen even from the publication date of some of the works quoted above, the controversy never completely ceased.

### III. THE SECOND ANTINOMIAN CONTROVERSY

After the Glorious Revolution and the accession of William and Mary seemingly ended the threat of Popery, the godly, who had largely spent the intervening years focused on more pressing matters, could once again return to in-house doctrinal disputes. Within a year, antinomianism (and charges of such) arose from the ashes of the Restoration Church. With the controversy having subsided at least for a time, however, Baxter’s frustration at the seemingly sudden re-ignition seems quite understandable. The re-publication of Tobias Crisp’s collection of sermons marked the beginning of what has been labeled the second antinomian controversy. While some of the same issues did return in the last decade of the seventeenth century, the controversy was hardly identical. In fact, for the most part the

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<sup>43</sup> Baxter, *Confession of Faith* (London: printed by R.W. for Tho. Underhill, and Fra. Tyton, and are to be sold at the Anchor and Bible in Pauls Churchyard, and at the three Daggers in Fleetstreet, 1655), 289.

<sup>44</sup> ESTC lists 59 works with ‘antinomian’ in the title from 1640-1659, 4 such works from 1660-1679, and 24 from 1680-1700, demonstrating in some way the high points of these controversies. Of course, these statistics must be viewed in the appropriate context. The ebb and flow of official censorship and freedom of the press certainly played a role in determining these numbers.

entire focus shifted from the conditionality of the new covenant and the *ordo salutis* to the related question of the actual number of divine meta-covenants.<sup>45</sup> This discussion subsumed those of the previous controversy and allowed for much more minute distinctions to take center-stage.

### A. THE NUMBER OF COVENANTS

At this point in English theology, the understanding of the covenants as organizing systematic principles remained inchoate with both two-covenant and three-covenant systems receiving ample support during the first half of the seventeenth century.<sup>46</sup> Despite the differing views on this issue between the participants of the first antinomian controversy, the number of covenants largely did not become a point of contention during that edition of the debate. Richard Baxter did wholeheartedly adopt a three-covenant system at least by 1658, on the heels of that first controversy. In this system, Baxter identified the *Covenant of Nature or Innocence*, between God and “*Mankind in Adam*,”<sup>47</sup> the *Covenant of Mediation*, between God the Father and the Incarnate Son,<sup>48</sup> and the *Covenant of Grace*, enacted

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<sup>45</sup> This term refers to the organizing covenants as defined by the theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Most theologians of this era identify two or three meta-covenants, variously labeled the *Covenant of Works or Nature*, the *Covenant of Redemption* and the *Covenant of Grace*.

<sup>46</sup> The best work on the development of the covenant systems remains David Weir’s *The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformation Thought*. Also see the discussions of this issue in Rolston, “Responsible Man in Reformed Theology: Calvin Versus the Westminster Confession,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970); Lillback, “Ursinus’ Development of the Covenant of Creation: a Debt to Melancthon or Calvin?” *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (1981); Arnold, “The Reformed Theology of Benjamin Keach (1640-1704)”, DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 2009 [i.e., 2010], 132-45.

<sup>47</sup> Baxter, *Catholick Theologie* (London: printed by Robert White for Nevill Simmons...1675), second part, sect. II.16.

<sup>48</sup> Baxter, “A Defence of Christ, and Free Grace: Against the Subverters, Commonly Called, Antinomians or Libertines; who Ignorantly Blaspheme Christ on Pretence of extolling Him.” in *The Scripture Gospel defended, and Christ, grace, and free justification vindicated against the libertines... in two books: the first, a breviat of fifty controversies about justification...the second upon the sudden reviving of antinomianism...and the re-printing of Dr. Crisp’s sermons with additions* Re-paginated addition (London: printed for Tho. Parkhurst, 1690), 10.

between God and humanity.<sup>49</sup> Baxter's view of the three-covenant system became the key point of disparity for the controversy at the end of the century.

In his response to the "sudden reviving of antinomianism... and the re-printing of Dr. Crisp's sermons,"<sup>50</sup> Baxter based his attack against Crisp on his view of the covenants. Specifically, Baxter cited his understanding of a "Law peculiar to the Mediator" as the "*Covenant between the Father and the Son*,"<sup>51</sup> the same covenant which he elsewhere labeled the *Covenant of Mediation*. This particular covenant placed specific conditions on Christ, namely:

That he should perfectly obey the Law of Innocency so far as it was fitted to his case, and overcome the Tempter...[t]hat he should perfectly keep the Law of *Moses*, so far as it agreed to him...[and t]hat he should perfectly do all that was proper to the Redeemer, in being a Sacrifice for sin, clearing and publishing the New Covenant...his promised reward being the success of his undertaking, the saving of his Church and his Glory, in the glorifying of God the Father...<sup>52</sup>

Significantly, this covenant only involved the First and Second Persons of the Trinity, and, even more importantly, the conditional aspects of the covenant applied only to Christ. In other words, Christ's fulfillment of the stated conditions only served to qualify Christ as the Mediator. In fact, Baxter clarified this stance only a few pages later:

Christ's *Perfect Obedience* to the Law of Innocency, exempteth us from the necessity of perfect obedience to it and from all duty of obeying it as the condition of life: But he did not *Repent and Believe* in obedience to his *own Law of Grace*, to exempt us from the necessity of

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<sup>49</sup> At times, Baxter combined the first covenant with the third, labeling this covenant 'the Law of Nature and Grace.' Baxter, *Confession of Faith*, 129.

<sup>50</sup> Baxter, *Scripture Gospel Defended* (London: printed for Tho. Parkhurst, 1690), title page.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

*Repenting and Believing*, which we must do our selves by his grace, or perish.<sup>53</sup>

Baxter used the term Law of Grace as a synonym for the third covenant, the covenant which was made between God and humanity. That covenant, too, was conditional.

When Baxter died in 1691, the *de facto* leadership of his party passed to Daniel Williams (c. 1643-1716) and, to a lesser extent, Samuel Clark (1626-1701). For the most part, these Baxterians followed the covenant outline established by Baxter and continued to use that outline as a tool for opposing the new Crispians, as these antinomians were often called. Williams explicated their position well when he noted that the *Covenant of Grace* promised blessings “to lower Degrees of Duty” “than the Covenant of Works had.”<sup>54</sup> That lesser degree of duty, required by the third covenant, provided a convenient role in the Baxterian system for humanity to meet the condition of faith.<sup>55</sup> Significantly, Baxter did not allow for this view of faith as a qualifying condition for participation in the third covenant to be equated with the instrumental view of faith common among his Reformed counterparts.<sup>56</sup> Rather, the third covenant required sincere obedience. The Baxterians understood (and accepted) that this view of the conditional aspect of the covenant practically left justification in an incomplete or imperfect state because the believer must be “first Righteous and then pardon’d, and not on the contrary, first pardon’d, and then Righteous.”<sup>57</sup>

The opposition to the Baxterians came largely from Isaac Chauncy (1632-1712), the Independent theologian who succeeded (one pastor removed) the eminent John Owen (1616-1683) as pastor of the Bury Street Independent congregation. Chauncy did not miss the importance of the three-covenant view to the Baxterian system of justification. Accordingly, Chauncy became

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>54</sup> Williams, *Gospel-Truth Stated and Vindicated* (London: printed for John Dunton, 1692), sig. A5v.

<sup>55</sup> Clark, *Scripture Justification* (London: printed by S. Bridge, for Tho. Parkhurst, 1698), 19.

<sup>56</sup> Baxter, *Of Justification* (London: printed by R.W. for Nevil Simmons ... and are to be sold by him...and by Nathaniel Elkins, 1658), 162. For the Reformed view, cf. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, *Second London Confession*, and *Savoy Declaration*, Art. XI.

<sup>57</sup> Clark, *Scripture Justification*, 18-19.

a staunch defender of a two-covenant system, arguing that it maintained the appropriate roles of grace and faith in justification. On this, Chauncy joined several well-known theologians such as Samuel Petto and even the Westminster Assembly which, in Art. VII of their confession, described two covenants: “a covenant of works...upon condition of perfect and personal obedience” and “a second, commonly called the covenant of grace.”<sup>58</sup> Chauncy and the other defenders of Crispianism firmly rooted their defense in a federal view of those covenants. Thus, Adam represented all of humanity in the first covenant while Christ represented the elect in the second.

Some of these Crispians, such as the Particular Baptist leader, Benjamin Keach (1640-1704),<sup>59</sup> recognized the danger of making the second covenant completely unconditional, namely that an unconditional covenant between God the Father and the federal head of the elect would undermine the conditional aspect of the first covenant. To say it Biblically, it would destroy the law rather than fulfill it. Thus, Keach, along with Chauncy, argued for a “twofold, or a mixt Covenant [of grace]”<sup>60</sup> which allowed Christ to fulfill the conditional aspects of the *Covenant of Grace*—part of which included active obedience to the first covenant, leaving the second covenant conditional for Him but unconditional for the elect. To complicate matters, these theologians engaged in a detailed, semantic discussion of types of conditions—federal conditions, those which procured the result, and conditions of connexion, or necessary incidentals (such as

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<sup>58</sup>Notably, Chauncy’s predecessor, John Owen, held to a three-covenant system, splitting the *Covenant of Grace* into a *Covenant of Redemption* and a *Covenant of Grace*. See Owen, *The Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (London: printed for R. Boulter, 1677), 268. Cf. Petto, *The Difference between the Old and New Covenant* (London: printed for Eliz. Calvert...1674).

<sup>59</sup>It should be noted that many of the theologians who defended Crisp did not accept all of his theology as their own. Such was the case with Keach who argued that he would ‘rather erre on their side, who strive to exalt wholly the Free Grace of God [i.e. Crisp], than on theirs, who seek to darken it and magnifie the Power of the Creature’. Keach, *Marrow of True Justification* (London: printed for Dorman Newman...1692), sig. A2r-Bv. Other theologians who were branded as Crispians included the Particular Baptists Hanserd Knollys (1599?-1691) and Thomas Edwards (d. 1699) as well as the Congregationalists Nathaniel Mather (1630-1697) and George Cokayn (bap. 1620, d. 1691).

<sup>60</sup>Keach, *Display of Glorious Grace* (London: printed by S. Bridge and sold by Mary Fabian...Joseph Collier...and William Marshall, 1698), 172.



creation, because nothing could happen for a person who was not created). This discussion bore striking similarities to the views Rutherford expressed earlier in the century. In the end, the Crispians focused their polemics on Christ's absolute procurement of covenantal blessing for the elect rather than on the role of faith in that procurement. In other words, the Crispians moved away from a discussion of justification *sola fide* to a discussion of justification *solus Christus*.

#### IV. CONCLUSION: THE END OF THE HAPPY UNION AND OTHER ADVERSE EFFECTS

Obviously, the discussion surrounding the doctrine of justification and the covenants during the second antinomian controversy focused on rather minute points of theology. Throughout, the discussion became heated with the brandings of *antinomian* and *neonomian* being some of the least offensive of the common labels launched at opponents. Finally, in 1694, this heated disagreement—which largely fell along proto-denominational lines of Congregationalists and Presbyterians—resulted in the dissolution of the so-called Happy Union and the end of those groups' joint lectures at Pinners' Hall. That divorce, however, was merely the final by-product. The real dispute, as has been seen, came from an utter difference in the definitions of justification by faith proposed by the respective parties over the course of six decades and two different, albeit related, controversies. The modern identification of these two disputes as mere repetitions of the same controversy—although supported by Baxter's noted surprise—ignores the changes in the doctrine of justification, the differences in the understanding of the role of faith in justification, and the shifts in the views of the covenants which made that justification possible. In other words, the antinomian controversies were far more complex and the ramifications for the doctrine of justification far more important than their polemical name may imply.

