

Antinomianism is Anti-covenant

League Day – Thursday 23 October 2008

Dear sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ,

It is my privilege this morning to address you on the topic “Antinomianism is anti-covenant”.

For the purpose of this speech I will define antinomianism as the error to think that in the New Testament Christ has abolished God's law, or changed the law.

Antinomianism: the error to think that Christ abolished the law, or changed the law.

There are many people who view the Old Testament as a testament of law, and the New Testament as a testament of grace. The New Testament is then viewed as if it has a different doctrine or teaches a different gospel than the Old Testament.

Exactly that is the crucial error of antinomianism: it does not see the old and the new covenant as one covenant containing one gospel. And so, by a false contrast between old and new covenant it concludes that God's law is something of the past, or that Christ replaced the law with a different law.

Now, for the next 40 minutes, we will do three things.

1. We will note the meaning of the law within the covenant of grace
2. We will note the norm and nature of Christian behaviour
3. We will note the relevance of this topic for the time in which we live

Let us then start by noting in the first place...

The meaning of the law within the covenant of grace

The whole Bible consists of two parts: Old Testament and the New Testament. The Greek word (diatheke) which is sometimes translated with "testament" is a word that should nearly always be translated "covenant". When you read your Bible and you see the word "testament" you may translate it "covenant".

The entire Bible is called covenant – old covenant and new covenant. That is how Scripture speaks of itself. God reveals Himself to us in and through the covenant.

The promise of the covenant is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. In and through Christ the covenant finds its fulfilment.

What then is the relation between the old covenant and the new covenant? In the old covenant Christ is promised; in the new covenant Christ has fulfilled the promise. The relation between the old and the new covenant is a relation of promise and fulfilment, shadow and reality.

In the old covenant the promise was often administered in ceremonies, shadows and copies of the reality in Christ. In the new covenant we see its full reality in Christ.

The old covenant and the new covenant is one and the same covenant. There is no difference in doctrine between the old covenant and the new covenant. The only difference is that the same gospel, which was previously veiled in shadows and ceremonies, has now come to its full reality in Christ.

"...all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen..." – 2 Cor. 1: 20.

In Christ we receive the truth of all God's promises.

God said to Abraham:

“...I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you” – Gen. 17: 7.

That is the promise: I will be your God. God promises Himself to us.

The rest of Scripture makes it clear that by establishing His covenant with us God entered into a relationship with us. It is a marriage covenant. The purpose of the covenant is that God may have communion with us, and that we may have communion with Him. That is: that we may walk before Him, and with Him, and unto Him in an intimate relationship of love and faithfulness. Now, how this covenant communion with God looks like is spelled out in His covenant law.

In order to establish this communion between God and us, we first had to be washed from the filthiness our sins. God cannot have any communion with sin because He is the Holy One. Therefore, because He is holy, His people too must be holy. And for this purpose He sent His own Son to deliver us from sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Our salvation is a salvation from sin unto holiness. And in this way the covenant relationship with God is restored.

This holy communion with God is the very essence and glory of our new life in and through Christ. For this purpose Christ came: to restore us to life in communion with God. Through Christ God is again our God.

You see then that the covenant communion with God is the very purpose of our salvation. This covenant communion with God is the fullness of life unto which Christ saved us and restores us.

The apostle John speaks about this covenant communion with God, and he says:

“This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we

have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin" –

1 John 1: 5 – 7.

Whoever walks in darkness has no communion with God. Whoever has communion with God walks in His light and practice the truth. The truth and the reality of the covenant is fellowship with God. And therefore any gospel that leaves us unholy is a false gospel. If you are not a saint, you are not a Christian. If anyone continues to live in the transgression of the law – that is: if anyone continues to live as a slave of sin – then he hasn't received any grace or salvation.

Now, what is sin? Sin is the transgression of God's law. There is no other definition of sin: sin is the transgression of God's law. And what is holiness? Holiness is to be conformed to the image of God. Scripture defines a holy life as a life in communion with God, a life in accordance with the image of God **as spelled out in His holy law**. Holiness is conformity to the holy being of God Himself. And His holiness, as it relates to us and to our life, has been revealed and spelled out to us in the law of God.

So then, holiness is conformity to God's law; and unrighteousness is transgression of the law.

God's law is the norm for right and wrong, for good and bad, for life and death. And this is so because the law is the very reflection of God's own Being. God Himself is the norm, **His** holiness and **His** righteousness as revealed in the law.

It is important that we understand this clearly. God's covenant law is the description of **His** righteousness as it relates to us. And therefore His covenant law is called the way of life:

“...O Israel, listen to the statutes and the judgements which I teach you to observe, **that you may live...**” – Deut. 4: 1.

“You shall walk in all the ways which the LORD your God has commanded you, **that you may live...**” – Deut. 5: 33.

“...the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it. See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgements, **that you may live...**” – Deut. 30: 15.

When the Lord repeats these words over and over again, “**that you may live**”, He is not simply speaking of physical life, but eternal life in spiritual communion with God.

“...this is eternal life, that they may know You...” – John 17: 3.

The fullness of true life is to have intimate communion with God – to know Him.

And when Christ says: “I am the way, the truth, and the life”, then He is not speaking of a different “way of life” than the “way of life” that has been revealed to Moses. It is still the same “way of life”. Through Christ we enter into holy communion with God – **that** communion which is demanded by God's own holiness as revealed in His law.

Christ did not come to abolish the law, but to restore us to that very same righteousness which has been revealed in the law.

Do you see how this removes any negative thoughts about the law, and brings us down on our knees to thank the Lord for His law? For His law is a description of life in its fullness – life in communion with the holy God! **This** is the life which God has given us in Christ.

How does this understanding of the covenant and of the law prevent the error of antinomianism? The answer is: in every way! If you have a clear understanding of the covenant, and of God's covenant law, no antinomianism is possible.

Nothing of the truth of God's law has passed away; it has come to its fullness in Christ.

Neither has Christ come to change God's law in any way. Christ has not established a different law, but brought the same law of the old covenant to its fullness in the new covenant.

Also the ceremonial laws haven't changed in the least. We still need the blood of the Lamb, we still need the High Priest and His intercession, there is still a true tabernacle in heaven where He fulfils His office in the new covenant, and forever. The only difference is that the shadows and copies of the truth have now come to its full reality. And what a difference! Not a difference in doctrine, but a difference in the measure of the glory revealed.

While the **outward administration** of the ceremonial laws has been abolished, these laws in themselves – in their true meaning – have not been abolished, but rather came to their full reality in Christ and in all of our salvation. And thus the meaning of the ceremonial laws will stand and be relevant for all eternity. Christ did not come to abolish or to change the law, but to fulfil.

The old covenant and the new covenant is one covenant. The relation is that of promise and fulfilment, shadow and reality. The old covenant passed away, not because its doctrine and laws have been abolished or changed, but because it has been fulfilled in all its detail. And "fulfil" means: it has come to its full reality in Christ.

In the second place we note...

The norm and nature of Christian behaviour

It is characteristic of antinomianism to confuse careful obedience with legalism.

The slogan of many theologians today has become: "Follow Christ, and forget about the detail of the law. If you love God, then you don't need all the detailed instructions of the law!" But that is a false gospel leading to lawlessness.

After Pentecost our obedience should not be less detailed or less careful. The Holy Spirit still writes the same law of God in our hearts than the one He has revealed in the old covenant. When Christ, and also the apostles, said that love is the fulfilment of the whole law, they gave that as a summary of the law. But, they did not give that summary as a replacement for the law! All the detail of the law still serves to instruct us in the way of life. The Holy Spirit still uses that detailed instruction to sanctify our lives.

If we ask what the norm for Christian ethics may be, the norm for Christian conduct, then it is not a law that has been stripped of its detail.

Nor has the law become more relaxed. God did not save us by lowering the standards of His law, but He saved us unto a righteousness full and complete. And the fullness in Christ does not wipe out the detail of the law.

Why then do many accuse us of legalism when we carefully stick to the detail of the law? Is it not because they are blinded by a false gospel?

Antinomianism is also characterised by a certain kind of mysticism. For when the detail of God's law has been removed, a vacuum is left. Then our

salvation in Christ becomes an empty shell without concrete content. Then the Holy Spirit has to guide us without instructions.

Antinomianism transgresses all God's commandments. It transgresses the first and the second commandments, for if God's law is replaced with something else, then men start to serve God their own way, as they see fit. Such self-willed religion, Scripture calls idolatry and image worship – 1 Sam. 15: 22, 23. (Compare also Lord's Day 35 of the Heidelberg Catechism). Then man serves a god which he creates for himself.

Antinomianism also transgresses the third commandment, for when God's law is minimised, the righteousness and the holiness of God are minimised, and the fear of the Lord disappears.

Yes, antinomianism is a transgression of all the commandments, because it adds and it takes away from the commandments, according to own insight. And it fails to see that Christ has come to restore us to that perfect covenant communion which is spelled out in the law; that He came to save us unto that new life of obedience in which we glorify God according to His commandments.

The error of antinomianism is also characterised in our day by a wrong view of love – a love that is no longer defined by God's law. It is the error to think that "love" excludes "duty". Christian conduct and Christian liberty is then presented to us as a spontaneous religion without effort. "Don't strain yourself to obey the law carefully and strictly", they say, "If you love God, then you will do all the right things automatically!"

This error is the result of a false contrast between love and duty. But Scripture does not know any tension between love and duty. True obedience is to take up our duty with gladness, and to render conscious and intentional obedience to God's commandments. To obey God's law diligently and carefully, and intentionally seeking to do God's will, is not legalism, but the fruit of true communion with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is an absolute right and there is an absolute wrong; for God has revealed **His** perfect righteousness, and we have to live in it.

This is of course not in tune with the spirit of our time, for we live in a postmodern world where there is no absolute right or absolute wrong anymore. All truth has become relative. What is true for you does not have to be true for me anymore. Each one may create his own truth! And the truth may change from time to time and from situation to situation – that is postmodernism.

And so antinomianism has found a garden mould in postmodernism. And it will flourish where doctrine is superficial and where a mystic experience is sought.

Dear sisters in the Lord, let us not separate Christ from His law. In Christ we receive everything, even the fullness of **God's** righteousness. And we received it not only in theory; His grace is active in us to restore us to the very image of God!

And thus we are called to study His law with dedication, and to delight ourselves in the righteousness of God, to walk in the way of life as it has been revealed to us.

When we understand the unity of the old and the new covenant, that it is one gospel, and that Christ came for this purpose: to restore us to that perfect covenant communion which is spelled out in the law of God, then we can no longer have any negative thoughts about God's law. Then we will no longer try to replace it with something else, or with a different kind of obedience. For God can have no communion with darkness.

Let us praise and worship God not only for His grace and mercy, but also for His righteousness and holiness. Let us not pick and choose between the attributes of God, but see God and know Him in the unity and in the fullness of His revelation.

In the third place we have to note...

The relevance of this topic for our own time

You may know a few church members who live worldly lives, or you may know others who became very relaxed in the way they serve the Lord. If you would address them on their lifestyle, or if you would admonish them for the way they speak, or for the way they dress, you can even tell their reaction beforehand: "Ah, don't be so stressed, we are not under law but under grace!"

Yes, we know how often that verse in Romans chapter 6 is quoted out of context, and misunderstood, and distorted!

Or sometimes you may get a reaction such as this one: "Ah, don't be so legalistic! We are just having a bit of fun. Come-on, you must allow some Christian freedom!"

What is legalism? And what is Christian freedom? Legalism is to try and earn your salvation by works. Legalism is a dangerous error, but it is something different from carefully obeying God's law because of a new life in Christ! And Christian freedom is something different from transgressing the law.

So, there you have a practical example of how antinomian thinking distorts the gospel. That one who did not want to be admonished for the way she dresses, who said: "Ah, don't be so stressed, we are not under law but under grace!" - she would be a typical example of someone with an antinomian mind frame.

But, to determine the relevance of our topic, we must not only look at practical examples or at our own situation. We note the relevance of our topic first of all when we turn to Scripture. Scripture itself puts this topic before us as one of the most relevant – a matter of life and death – and it will remain relevant for all times. Let us then quickly note what Scripture has to say about the relevance of our topic, and then evaluate our own time in the light of Scripture.

When we look at the letters of the apostles, we notice that they had to defend the gospel especially against two major heresies: on the one side

legalism, on the other hand a false gospel without law and a false liberty. These two errors are equally dangerous. Both lead to death.

And therefore the apostles are constantly fighting **both** errors. You know how fiercely the apostle Paul attacks the heresy of legalism:

“O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth...this only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?” – Gal. 3: 1, 2.

The apostle is not able to discuss this in a relaxed manner; he describes himself as “in the pains of childbirth” (Gal. 4: 19, NIV) for the sake of the Galatians. The whole letter makes clear that their life is at stake! Try to add anything to your acceptance before God by your own works, and you are cursed, he says.

And you know also how he defends the doctrine of justification through faith alone in his letter to the Romans. We are saved by grace alone, in Christ alone, through faith alone.

The danger of legalism is real, and we should fight it with all our might.

But what about antinomianism?

Many people think that the apostle Paul **only** fought legalism – as if that is the only danger for which we ought to watch out! A careful reading of his letters will reveal, however, that he is just as much concerned to guard the gospel against antinomianism than against legalism.

The apostle Paul is surely fighting antinomianism. Even the two great “anti-legalism” letters, Romans and Galatians, still contains a sharp attack on those who rejoice in Christian liberty while they live in sin.

"...why not say, 'Let us do evil that good may come'? – as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say. Their condemnation is just" – Rom. 3: 8

"...Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! ..."
– Rom. 6: 1

"...if you live according to the flesh you will die..." – Rom. 8: 13

The danger of a false liberty is constantly in his mind.

We find the same when we turn to his letter to the Galatians:

"...you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word, even in this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'" – Gal. 5: 13, 14.

"The works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" – Gal. 5: 19 – 21.

Clearly the apostle was not only concerned about justification by faith alone! He addresses both the danger of legalism **and** the danger of a lawless gospel. Both errors are equally real – and he attacks both with the same uncompromising zeal for the truth.

The point is: he does this even in his letters to the Romans and to the Galatians. Even in these two letters where he focuses on the danger of legalism he still does not lose sight of the danger of a false gospel which is without law.

Now, while the Lord has included in Scripture letters like Romans and Galatians, He also included letters such as James and 2 Peter and Jude and the epistles of John. You know how the focus in these letters is very strongly against a false gospel without law, and urges us to grow in obedience to God's law. When Peter writes a whole chapter warning against false teachers, he describes those false teachers as lawless people who "walk according to the flesh". While they promise liberty to others they themselves are slaves of corruption – 2 Peter chapter 2.

Or think of the apostle John:

"...by this we know that we know God, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him', and does not keep His commandments, is a liar..." – 1 John 2: 3, 4.

And so we could continue quoting from the apostle's writings to show how they were fighting not only legalism, but also a false liberty without law.

Through His apostles God Himself has proven the utmost importance of this topic. We have to study it diligently with care and discernment, for it is indeed a matter of life and death.

Now, in order to understand our own time we also have to understand our time in the context of church history. Ages of spiritual darkness preceded the great Reformation of the 16th century. The Roman Catholic Church, or as we should rather call them, the Romanists, did not guard the gospel against legalism, nor did their priests refrain themselves from lawlessness. Legalism and lawlessness may at first seem to be opposites, but in fact they are twins. For without Christ nothing but lawlessness remains. Christ says for example

that the Scribes and Pharisees were lawless people – Mat. 23: 28. The Pharisees were legalistic and lawless – although their lawlessness was covered by an outward show of fake obedience.

We see the same in the dark Middle Ages. But then the Reformation came.

Immediately we think of the two great Reformers, Luther and Calvin. Luther rediscovered – so to speak – the glorious doctrine of justification.

It is sad to say, however, that Luther had a very negative view of the law. One sees this in many of his writings. While he was clear on justification by faith alone, he was not so clear on the nature and purpose of the law. With respect to his view of the law he was not fully Reformed. And this opened the door for many heresies that sprang up in protestant churches.

Luther had one thing right, and that was justification. He could rightly sing the praises of God's grace, but that the law is the very description of life in communion with God, and that it was given for this very purpose to instruct and sanctify our lives to the glory of God – that he could not fully appreciate.

Luther's error became even worse in the theology of many of his followers, and we are still today reaping the fruit.

The church had to wait for another Reformer. It was Calvin that would clearly spell out the Reformed faith in his institutions. Calvin made clear that there is no other norm for Christian ethics, than the law of God, and that the purpose of our whole life is to live unto God according to His commandments. With Calvin the importance and the extent of "Soli Deo Gloria" again came to its right.

But let us now consider our own time.

Somehow Luther's theology has become very popular in our day – also in Reformed circles. Add to that a kind of dispensationalism which makes the new covenant loose from the old covenant and even contrasts the doctrine

of the new covenant with the doctrine of the old covenant, and you get a totally distorted gospel.

It happens in our day that Christ is separated from God's law, and a different ethics is introduced in the churches. It is then said that we should forget about the detail of the law and simply follow Christ – as if Christ can be separated from His law.

That is the kind of theology that you will find in most Christian bookshops. It even starts to creep into Reformed seminaries. Such books and literature and sermons may seem to sing the praises of God's grace, yet it is a false grace. It is no longer able to expound the riches of God's law, or to instruct us in true righteousness.

There is a new paradigm for Christian ethics which calls itself “the style of the kingdom”. According to this ethics, God's law is in many respects outdated. God's law is no longer seen as the only norm for obedience to God. We simply have to follow Christ, they say – as if obedience to Christ is something different than obedience to God's law.

Yes, legalism separates the law from Christ, but these people separate Christ from His law.

God and His law are separated from each other, as if we can love God without obeying His commandments.

Churches that have been overcome by this doctrine will not discipline someone who divorces his wife, as long as he continues to live “in the style of the kingdom”! And what is the style of the kingdom? According to them it is some kind of a mystic following of Christ without the detailed instructions of His law.

Any call to obey God's law carefully and diligently in all its detail, is viewed as legalism. We should just live in the style of the kingdom and forget about the detail of the law!

Actually, the whole concept of “law” has a bitter taste in their mouth.

They have been misled by a false gospel. If the Lord does not prevent, this new "kingdom ethics" will soon destroy its thousands. Antinomianism is gaining ground.

It is clear then that our topic this morning is of the utmost importance for the time in which the Church finds herself – maybe more relevant than you would even thought.

I hope that these introductory words will stimulate and prepare you for our discussions, and may the Lord give us the knowledge, insight and discernment that we need to grow in the true knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Through Him we enter into full communion with God, life in fellowship with the holy God, life as spelled out in His covenant law.

Amen.