

Text: Ephesians 4: 1-16  
Title: Grace and Antinomianism

Date: August 2, 2009

This month's Bud Crowl Theological word of the week is Antinomianism. Earlier this summer, Bud was teasing me about using exegete in a sentence- along the lines of, if you want to say interpret the Bible, why not use a word that everyone knows? The obvious answer to that is to make sure everyone knows what it means- so blame him. all kidding aside, antinomian is derived from anti- which everyone knows is a negative and **nomos** comes from the Greek word for Law- so antinomianism is the notion that the Gospel of Grace cancels out our need to live by the law.

This isn't as out there as you might think. Here's the problem- we have an individual relationship with God as a result of Jesus dying for each of our sins. At the same time, we experience the Christian life in community- and communities cannot operate without shared ground rules. At first glance, these two poles in which we live out our Christian lives seem polar opposites. How do we find a balance?

Historically, there are 2 extreme approaches to manage this tension. The first are those who argued that since they are new creatures in Christ that the old rules do not apply. We call them antinomians- anti law, get it? They had a basic misunderstanding of our reaction to God's grace. Paul was clear; the Law was designed to demonstrate to us once and for all that it was impossible to prove ourselves to God by the strength of our own morality- sin always gets in the way, highlighting our need for God's grace and intervention. So on one hand the antinomians were right- one did not have to, in fact, could not if they wanted to; approach God solely on the basis of obedience to the Law. Where they went wrong was throwing out the entirety of the 10 commandments, stating that the old ways were no longer valid and now it was anything goes.

We know from extra-biblical sources that in the Corinthian Church there were those who used this kind of reasoning to declare that their old marriages were no longer valid. Can you imagine coming home from work and having your spouse tell you that because they have accepted the promises of the Gospel that you are no longer married? Not a way to win friends and influence people! If that was not bad enough, we know from biblical sources that in the Corinthian church there were those who used the

communal meal they served with communion as an opportunity to get falling down drunk. We know of at least one guy who was sleeping with his father's girlfriend! And the church was OK with this? Just who thinks that is a good idea? There was even a group in North Africa called the Adamists. They rejected marriage because Adam and Eve were not married and they worshipped in the nude. One only hopes that they were better looking than I am.

On the other extreme were those who said that yes we are saved by grace- but God's grace brings us into the Christian community- and now we have to embrace lives of holiness- holiness as measured by outward appearances. In a way you can see their reasoning as well. Not only were these early Christians operating in a pagan environment in which fertility cults used sex as a sacrament, they were also a community under persecution. As so often happens when communities are persecuted, they turn inwards and become more concerned with purity and maintaining a united front. In these traditions, unity is the all in all and unity is maintained by a strict moral code. Think of the Amish, who to this day work very hard to live as if they are in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. They wear the same clothes, they speak their own language and the penalty for individualism is internal exile- shunning. If the community is your whole world, then to have that community not acknowledge your existence is virtual capital punishment.

While the Amish and the Adamists may be extreme examples- the basic philosophy behind their response to the gospel is still around. There are still Christian traditions that insist on a strict and specific moral code (lips that touch liquor will never touch mine, no dancing, that sort of thing...) as an outer indicator of one's relationship with God. And there are those traditions, in reaction to the strict moralists bend over backward not to judge anyone or hold anyone accountable for their actions. In a highly sexualized society like ours- things can get real strange real quick.

So what are we to do, how do we thread the needle between these 2 extremes? Well the first step is to recognize the misunderstandings that lie behind both of them. We come to the Gospel individually, led and empowered to accept its promises. We are re-created from the inside out and now we are able, again by the power of the Holy Spirit to live lives of gratitude and service, becoming more holy in the process. Sanctification was the old word for this.

Where the rules folk got it wrong was that they put the cart in front of the horse. If I say such and such is indicative of inner holiness, it is too easy to hear, "if I do such and such, then I will be holy." Grace goes right out the window and we have just embraced the Law. Holiness does not work from the outside in- that leads to hypocrisy. Holiness is simply an outward manifestation of what is inside our hearts.

And this is exactly where the antinomians run aground- for without embracing a life of discipline, there is no growth, there is no experience of sanctification. Yes, one has a relationship with God, but one is stuck in the spiritual terrible twos- sitting in our own mess, demanding our own way and generally stinking up the place.

Luckily, the writer of Ephesians gives us an answer. Chapter 4 presumes that conversion leads to moral renewal. Embracing individual holiness will enable us to live in harmonious community. Living a life worthy of the calling recalls God's command to his people to be a light to the gentiles. We think of gentleness as the opposite of violence- but in Greek (*praute*) means disposed to forgiveness, opposed to wrath and revenge and to live without jealousy or spite. When you think about it- words like patience, bearing with one another, and working to maintain the unity of the Spirit all are examples of humility and gentleness.

We tend to think of this passage in light of the job listings we find- apostles, prophets, pastors, teachers, etc- but what Ephesians is promising is that when we individually embrace holiness- God will equip us with tools to build up and participate in the Christian community. When we are grounded in the Christian community, the church, then we are less likely to be sucked up in what he calls every wave of doctrine. And doesn't that mirror our own experience? Esoteric theology aside- this is where we experience the faith.

So it is no accident that today we celebrate the New Covenant. We recall what Christ has done for us individually, but in the sharing of the elements with each other, we recognize that we are in covenant relationship with one another as well. We are knit together- and together we will become the holy people of God.