

The New Antinomianism: A Critique of the New Theology of Grace

The version of this paper was presented at a Clergy Meeting of the Anglican Diocese in Singapore in 2014. I would like to thank Bishop Rennis Poniah for inviting me to speak on this topic.

The same material was also presented at a Conference organised by the Chinese Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of Singapore in 2016, at the invitation of Bishop Chong Chin Chung.

INTRODUCTION

In his book *Pure Grace* published in 2012, Clark Whitten the pastor of Grace Church in Longwood, Florida, writes that a ‘New Grace Reformation’ is underway. According to Whitten, this new movement will not only correct the mistakes that we have learned from the Reformers. It will also revolutionise our understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Whitten argues that while the sixteenth century Reformers got the doctrine of justification by grace through faith right, ‘they missed it on sanctification, or how one is perfected into the likeness of Christ.’¹ He asserts that while Luther and Calvin emphasise that salvation is by grace through faith, they seem to teach that sanctification could only be achieved by works. Whitten explains:

Luther and Calvin both drew up rigid rules of conduct in their churches. Calvin, for example, had a catalogue of austere rules of morality including bans on swearing, gambling, and fornication. He forbade dancing even at weddings. Unexcused absences from worship services were severely penalised. Adultery and homosexuality could draw severe sentences, even death.²

Whitten describes the fundamental problem with the theology of the Reformers, as he sees it, in this way: ‘Here is the approach Luther and Calvin took. One is saved by grace through faith, but then for the rest of our earthly lives we must try our best to modify our behaviour to please God and release

¹ Clark Whitten, *Pure Grace: The Life Changing Power of Uncontaminated Grace* (Shippensburg: Destiny Image, 2012), 24.

² *Ibid.*

his blessing in our lives.’³ Since then, evangelical churches of every stripe have been teaching ‘a version of the Gospel leavened with the law.’⁴ In other words, Protestant churches today are entangled in legalism, and the Reformers must bear responsibility for this unhappy predicament.

According to Whitten, the Gospel presents something radically different from the Reformers’ portrayal of the Christian life. ‘The old religious approach of “I *am* justified. I *am being* sanctified and I *will be* glorified” is a lie,’ he writes.⁵ The idea of progressive sanctification that is taught by all the traditions of the Church is erroneous and must be rejected, according to Whitten and the new antinomians. In fact, Whitten says that this teaching is ‘nonsense’.⁶ Just as the believer is already justified, so he is already sanctified and perfected, Whitten insists. ‘Listen,’ he writes, ‘I believe that if you aren’t made perfect now, you cannot be in union with God, and you won’t go to Heaven! No unsanctified person or thing can live in God’s presence. God will not do anything to me in Heaven that He hasn’t already done here!’⁷ Thus, the new antinomians teach that Christians are free from sin, free from the requirements of the moral law of God, and free from God’s condemnation because of what Christ has accomplished on the cross. Also, because of the cross, God can never be angry with or judge Christians. Christians worship a happy God, who can never get upset with his children.

This new doctrine of grace and the Christian life has captured the imagination of many Christians in the United States and beyond. Some popular preachers of this new theology of grace are Clark Whitten, Steve McVey,⁸ John Crowder,⁹ Paul Ellis,¹⁰ Bob Rufus,¹¹ and Tony Ide. In Singapore, the most prominent ‘evangelist’ for this new antinomianism is Joseph Prince of New Creation Church. Why should the doctrine and influence of these radical grace teachers concern us? Do they err only in that they over-emphasise the message of grace? Or do their teachings and admonishments distort the Gospel itself and the entire witness of Scripture? Does this new doctrine of grace, this new antinomianism, pose a danger to

³ Ibid., 25.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁸ Steve McVey, *Grace Walk: What You’ve Always Wanted in the Christian Life* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2005).

⁹ John Crowder, *Mystical Union: Stuff They Never Told You About the Finished Work of the Cross* (Floyd, VA: Sons of Thunder Ministries and Publications, 2016).

¹⁰ Paul Ellis, *The Hypergrace Gospel: Response to Michael Brown and Those Opposed to the Modern Grace Message* (Birkenhead, New Zealand: Kings Press, 2014).

¹¹ Bob Rufus, *Living in the Grace of God* (Milton Keynes, UK: 2007).

the church? The answers to these questions will become quite obvious after we've examined some of the main tenets of these hyper-grace teachers.

SCRIPTURE

Let us begin by examining what the new antinomians teach about Scripture and how they use Scripture to support their erroneous doctrine of grace. I think it is impossible to over-emphasise just how important a close examination of how movements or groups regard and use Scripture is if we are to properly assess their orthodoxy or heterodoxy. This is true for the proponents of the Health and Wealth Gospel, the leaders of the New Apostolic Reformation and the hyper-charismatics. And it is certainly true also for the new antinomians, the peddlers of the new doctrine of grace.

There is no doubt whatsoever that the Church has always regarded Scripture as her primary authority for faith and life. The statements and doctrinal standards of the different Christian denominations and churches bear eloquent witness to this. For example, Article 6 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion in the Anglican tradition clearly and categorically states that:

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation.

In his Preface to the New Testament Notes, John Wesley – the founder of Methodism – writes eloquently about the authority and beauty of God's written word:

The Scripture therefore of the Old and New Testament, is a most solid and precious system of divine truth. Every part thereof is worthy of God; and all together are one entire body, wherein is no defect, no excess. It is the fountain of heavenly wisdom, which they who are able to taste, prefer to all writings of men, however wise, or learned, or holy.¹²

These statements are unequivocal in their acknowledgement of the authority of Scripture. They are all agreed that it is *canonical* Scripture, the Bible in its entirety that should serve as the infallible guide for the Church. These statements are themselves based on what Scripture says about itself, found in

¹² John Wesley, 'Preface to the New Testament', <http://bible.christiansunite.com/wes/wes0B.shtml>. Accessed 15 November 2015.

2 Timothy 3:16: 'All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.'

The new antinomians, however, maintain that not all of Scripture is authoritative for Christians. They teach that as members of the new covenant, Christians should acknowledge only some passages of Scripture as authoritative for their lives. In his 2013 article published in *Charisma*, Bishop Joseph Mattera states that one of the telling signs of a hyper-grace church is their low view of the Old Testament. He writes: 'In these churches, the Old Testament is treated as only types and shadows for sermon illustrations but has no real value regarding our standard of living today.'¹³

This is to put the case quite mildly. Some of these new antinomians go so far as to say that the Old Testament should not be published together with the New Testament because this would create confusion among Christians. For example, Andre van der Merwe, in his book *Grace: The Forbidden Gospel*, writes:

At the risk of sounding critical, it remains a sad reality that the Bible Society chose to combine the Old and New Testaments into a single book. This single decision has caused widespread confusion within the ranks of believers throughout the world. Many of the writings in the Bible before the cross portrays God to be a harsh, cruel being, set on destroying and punishing people if they dared to disobey the set of moral standards represented by the 10 Commandments and the other laws.¹⁴

The hyper-grace teachers maintain that the law in the Old Testament is irrelevant for Christians because they are meant for people who belong to the old covenant. Christians, however, belong to the new covenant, which must be distinguished from the old because it is the dispensation of grace. The new antinomians therefore accuse those who teach that the moral laws in the Old Testament are still significant for Christians of legalism.

The new antinomians claim that their doctrine is mainly established on the writings of Paul. Joseph Prince, the pastor of the mega-church in Singapore, New Creation Church, exemplifies the Paulinism of the new antinomians. Prince said repeatedly that he preaches only the gospel that Paul preaches. He gives the impression that the other passages in the New Testament are either

¹³ Joseph Mattera, '8 Signs of "Hypergrace" Churches', <http://www.charismamag.com/spirit/spiritual-growth/18158-8-signs-of-hypergrace-churches>, accessed 10 November 2015.

¹⁴ Andre van der Merwe, *Grace, the Forbidden Gospel: Jesus Tore the Veil. Religion Sewed it Back up* (Edinburgh: Westbow Press, 2011), 28.

not as authoritative or completely unimportant compared to the writings of Paul.

However, it should be pointed out that the new antinomians use only selective passages from Paul, which are commandeered to support their theology of the Christian life. For example, in his book *Grace Walk*, Steve McVey stresses that Christians should never be engaged in ‘constant self-examination.’¹⁵ This is of course in direct contradiction to Paul’s admonition to Timothy to ‘Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching’ (1 Timothy 4:16). Like the other teachers of this new doctrine of grace, McVey also insists that all forms of disciplined obedience must be seen as legalism. Again, this is in conflict with the teachings of Paul, who encouraged Timothy to train himself in godliness (1 Timothy 4:7).

The Paulinism of the new antinomians has even led them to prefer Paul to Jesus. They teach that the messages of Jesus and Paul are different. For example, van der Merwe writes in *Grace* that ‘Paul preached a different message than Jesus, but for a good reason: They were living under different covenant.’¹⁶ Jesus was mostly speaking to Jews in the old covenant, while Paul was speaking to Christians in the new. Van der Merwe adds:

It is these preachers of law [i.e., the non-hyper-grace preachers] that love to quote scriptures from the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John out of context, forgetting that the crowds who Jesus was preaching to were Jews! These Jews had been polluted with hundreds of years of preaching of the Old Testament Law, hearing day after day that is their obedience to the law [that] will cause them to become righteous and that their level of morality and good performance will earn them God’s acceptance and blessings.¹⁷

The promoters of the hyper-grace doctrine therefore maintain that many of the teachings of Jesus do not apply to Christians because they are directed at the Jews of the old covenant. For them, only the things that Jesus said after the cross and resurrection apply to Christians. The clearest articulation of this teaching comes from Joseph Prince. In his article published on his website, Prince writes:

Whether interpreting the Old Testament, or the words which Jesus spoke in the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), let Jesus and His finished work at the cross be the keys to unlocking

¹⁵ Steve McVey, *Grace Walk* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 1995), 112.

¹⁶ Van der Merwe, *Grace*, xi.

¹⁷ Van De Merwe, *Grace*, 40.

all the precious gems hidden in God's Word. This means that we have to read everything in the context of what He came to do and what He accomplished at the cross for us. For example, some of the things that Jesus said in the four gospels were spoken before the cross – before He died for our sins – and some were said after the cross – when He had already won our complete forgiveness and rightfully given is His righteousness. It is the latter that applies to us (believers under the new covenant) today.¹⁸

This means that Jesus' teaching on the Lord's Prayer, loving our neighbours, being salt and light of the world, the Beatitudes, and the injunctions in the Sermon on the Mount do not apply to Christians. The new antinomians appear to have outdone the second century heretic, Marcion of Sinope (85-160), who rejected the Old Testament. At least Marcion – unlike the new antinomians – did not reject the teachings of Jesus or distort those of the Apostle Paul.

GOD'S MORAL LAW

We turn our attention next to God's moral law, and what the hyper-grace teachers have to say about its place in the life of the Christian. We must begin by noting that the new antinomians do not teach that the law of God is bad, or that it is inadequate. They do not say that they hate the law or encourage their followers to do so. Many of them stress this again and again in their teachings about the law in an attempt to distance themselves from antinomianism. For example, in his book *The Naked Gospel* Andrew Farley writes: 'The law isn't sinful. Law haters, known as antinomians, have been misinterpreting the Scriptures since the days of the early church. They say the law is evil'.¹⁹ In similar vein, Joseph Prince declared:

One of the things I have been accused of is being an antinomian (someone who is against the law of Moses). The truth is that I have the highest regard for the law ... I am for the law, for the purpose for which God gave the law.²⁰

Notice that both Farley and Prince deliberately mentioned the antinomian heresy and took great pains to distance themselves from it. But, as we shall

¹⁸ Joseph Prince, 'What Does It Mean to "Rightly Divide the Word", and How Do We Do It?', <http://support.josephprince.org/index.php?Knowledgebase/Article/View/122/22/i-what-does-it-mean-to-rightly-divide-the-word-and-how-do-we-do-it>, accessed 11 November 2015.

¹⁹ Andrew Farley, *The Naked Gospel: Jesus Plus Nothing* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: 2009), 60.

²⁰ Joseph Prince, *Destined to Reign* (Singapore: Joseph Prince Resources, 2015), 122-3.

see, both of them cannot escape the charge of promoting a version of antinomianism in their teaching concerning divine grace.

Now, if the hyper-grace teachers deny that they have a low or dismissive view of the moral laws of God, how do they in fact regard them? What role or function do the moral laws of God play in his divine plan and in the life of the Christian? The new antinomians argue that God gave the law for a very specific purpose, namely, to reveal and condemn sin. It was given to expose the inability of the sinner to please God with his conduct. And it was given so that sinners can be led to Christ. But once the unbeliever puts his faith in Christ, once the sinner becomes a born-again follower of the Saviour, the moral laws of God are no longer relevant to him or her. In other words, the new antinomians stress that God's moral law has no place whatsoever in the life of the believer, who is under the covenant of grace.

Perhaps the clearest articulation of the teachings of the new antinomians with regard to the moral law of God is found in the writings of Joseph Prince. In *Destined to Reign*, Prince asserts that 'God did not give the law for us to keep. He gave the law to bring man to the end of himself, so that he would see his need for a Saviour.'²¹ In the same book, Prince declares that 'God gave the law for one purpose, and that is by the law, the world would have the knowledge of sin, and recognise their Saviour.'²² If the new antinomians stopped at this point, we can still concede 'So far so good'. What they have said is incomplete, but it is not wrong in itself. But they did not stop there. They teach that originally God wanted the Israelites to enter into a covenant of grace with him. But the Israelites arrogantly refused and preferred instead to conduct their relationship with God on the basis of the law. Paul Ellis explains:

From the beginning, God desired a relationship with us but we preferred rules. God told the Israelites that he wanted them to be his treasured people but they weren't interested. Their attitude was, 'Just tell us what to do and we'll do it'.²³

The new antinomians arrive at this conclusion on the basis of an erroneous interpretation of the response of the people of Israel recorded in Exodus 24:7: 'And they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient".' In their idiosyncratic reading of this text, this act of submission is interpreted as an act of defiance. Again, Joseph Prince has offered the most lucid explanation:

²¹ Ibid., 123.

²² Ibid., 16.

²³ Paul Ellis, *The Gospel in Ten Words* (Edinburgh: KingsPress, 2012), 20.

Now, they wanted to exchange the covenant of grace that they had been under for a different kind of covenant. When Moses told them what God had said, they responded arrogantly (which can be seen from the Hebrew syntax), saying in essence, ‘All that God commands us, we are able to perform!’ In other words, this is what they said to God, ‘God, don’t judge us and bless us anymore based on Your goodness and faithfulness. Assess us based on our merits. Bless us based on our obedience because we are well able to perform whatever You demand of us!’²⁴

The new antinomians teach that the law has no ability to condemn believers in Christ. Thus, Joseph Prince could write that after the cross ‘the law no longer had the power to condemn man as long as he believed on Jesus.’²⁵ In fact, according to Prince, believers who submit themselves to the moral law of God are giving to the devil power over them. ‘If you insist on being under the law’, he writes, ‘you are actually arming the devil again’²⁶ and ‘the devil is the one using the law to bring about death and condemnation and to put believers under oppression.’²⁷ According to Prince, the law only condemns. So, the Ten Commandments are synonymous with condemnation. ‘Let me give you a practical tip on how you can grow in this revelation of “no condemnation”’: Learn to see the Ten Commandments (the law of God) and condemnation as the same thing. Whenever you read or think about the law, think “condemnation”, he writes.²⁸

Traditionally, theologians make the distinction between God’s ceremonial and moral laws. Most concur that while the ceremonial laws in the Old Testament no longer apply to Christians, the moral laws still do. Prince, along with the other hyper-grace proponents, reject this distinction. For them, both the ceremonial and moral laws are no longer applicable to believers. Thus, Prince writes categorically that ‘*The law is not for you the believer, who has been made righteous in Christ! The law is not applicable to someone who is under the new covenant of grace.*’²⁹ In light of this, Prince goes on to assert that preachers of repentance exercise ‘a ministry of condemnation.’ Although the ministry of condemnation is glorious, he argues, the ministry of righteousness (i.e., his antinomian doctrine) is even more so. In a TV interview, Prince states:

²⁴ Joseph Prince, *Unmerited Favour* (Singapore: Joseph Prince Resources, 2014), 112.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 121.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 100 (emphasis in original).

I shared about how some revivals, down through church history, use a lot of law, a lot of condemnation, you know? And even great men of God, men of God that I highly esteem and respect like Finney, like John Sung, you know great men. But they will use the law. They will use the law until you are bleeding from every pore ...

Ministry of condemnation has glory. It has glory. But the Bible says the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory.³⁰

It is clear that Prince and the hyper-grace teachers are fond of creating false dichotomies and antitheses. There are the antitheses between the ministry of condemnation and the ministry of righteousness, and between the grace-filled life and the obedient life. There's also the antithesis between Jesus and the law. Finally, there is the antithesis between a relationship founded on love and a relationship founded on obedience. But all these antitheses are false. The Bible does not make them. In fact, the reverse is true. There is no antithesis between Jesus and the law. Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it. 'Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them' (Matthew 5:17). There is no dichotomy between the freedom of the life in the Spirit and obedience to the law. In James 1:25, we read: 'Whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it – not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it – they will be blessed in what they do...' And there is no dichotomy between love and obedience for Jesus said: 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments' (John 14:15). What God in his wisdom has joined, the new antinomians have put asunder!

It is also clear that the hyper-grace teachers fail to fully understand why God gave his moral laws. The Reformers taught that there are three uses or functions of God's moral laws. The first may be described as the *theological* use or function of the law. Here the law is given to point to the holiness of God (the Law-Giver) and the sinfulness of fallen human beings. In the words of Martin Luther, the law serves as a mirror to

reveal to man his sin, blindness, misery, wickedness, ignorance, hate, contempt of God ... When the law is used correctly, it does nothing but reveal sin, work wrath, accuse, terrify, and reduce consciences to the point of despair.³¹

³⁰ Quoted in Michael Brown, *Hyper-Grace: Exposing the Damages of the Modern Grace Message* (Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma House, 2014), 201.

³¹ Martin Luther, *Weimar Ausgabe* 40:481-486.

The law drives the sinful human being to the Gospel and to Christ, who alone can save him from sin and death. If the first use of the law is theological, the second use may be described as *civil*. Here, the law is given to restrain persons from sinful conduct and to ensure good order in society through public morality. ‘The law is like a halter,’ writes John Calvin, ‘to check or shame, [persons] dare neither execute what they have conceived in their minds, nor openly breathe forth the rage of their lust.’³² In addition to these two functions of the law there is a third – the *educational* use. The law, the Reformers taught, is given as a guide to regenerated believers (Christians) so that they may do the works that please God. As John Calvin puts it, even to the most matured and devout Christians the law is still needed so that they may ‘learn more thoroughly ... the Lord’s will [and] to be aroused to obedience.’³³ While the new antinomians have emphasised the first use of the law, they have totally rejected its third function.

SIN AND REPENTANCE

One of the most egregious aspects of the teaching of the new antinomians has to do with their understanding of sin and repentance. It is also a doctrine that clearly distinguishes their teaching from orthodox theology and identifies these teachers as antinomian in essence. The Bible clearly teaches that Christians must constantly repent of their sins because they always fall short of the glory of God. The Bible and orthodox Christian teaching present Christians as not fully sanctified and as not yet made perfect by God’s Spirit in this life, but are instead in the process of being sanctified. Entire sanctification and perfection, therefore, are eschatological realities. Luther therefore could say that Christians are ‘justified sinners’, who although are justified by the grace of God continue to sin and are therefore in need of God’s forgiveness.

Two passages from the New Testament would suffice to substantiate this. Writing to Christians, James says in 4:8-10: ‘Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.’ The second passage, also addressed to Christians, is taken from 1 John 1: ‘But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins

³² John Calvin, *Institutes* 2.7.10.

³³ *Institutes* 2.7.12.

and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness ...' (9-10). Both James and John were writing to Christians. They speak of the godly sorrow that Christians should display in relation to their own sinfulness as well as the need for repentance.

The new antinomians, however, reject the traditional teaching that believers need to repeatedly repent and confess their sins and receive God's forgiveness. They teach that the New Testament clearly says that when someone accepts Christ, all his sins – past, present and future – are forgiven. Christians therefore do not need to repeatedly repent of their sins and ask God for the forgiveness that they have already received once and for all at their conversion. Again, it is Joseph Prince who has clearly articulated this teaching. In *Unmerited Favour*, Prince writes:

... how often do you have to confess your sins for Jesus to forgive and cleanse you from all unrighteousness? Only once! In that very instance when you prayed the prayer of salvation, *all* the sins that you would commit for your entire life were forgiven once and for all. You received the full redemptive work of Jesus on the cross into your life, and all his blessings, his favour, his health and his success became yours! Let me say this plainly: You do not need to confess your sins again and again to be forgiven. You are *already* forgiven!³⁴

That is why, Prince argues, Paul did not mention confession of sins in any of his epistles. Instead, Prince insists, 'we have clear and certain passages in all of Paul's letters that state beyond the shadow of doubt that all our sins are forgiven, and that our forgiveness of sins is "according to the riches of his grace [unmerited favour]", and not by our works!'³⁵ What about 1 John 1:9, which clearly states that 'If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'? Prince simply asserts that this verse does not apply to Christians because John was directing his remarks at the early Gnostics. He claims that the context makes it clear that '*1 John 1:9 was not written to believers.*'³⁶ John was challenging Gnostics to repent and accept Christ. This is another example of the idiosyncratic hermeneutics of the new antinomians.

The new antinomians also teach that the Holy Spirit was not given to believers to convict them of their sins. In *Destined to Reign*, Joseph Prince

³⁴ Prince, *Unmerited Favour*, 191 (emphasis in original).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 189.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 190.

maintains that the Holy Spirit never convicts believers of sin; he only convicts them of their righteousness in Christ:

The Holy Spirit never convicts (Christians) of your sins. He never comes to point out your faults ... It does not take a revelation from the Holy Spirit to see that you have failed. However, when you know you have failed what you need to do is for the Holy Spirit to convict you of your righteousness.³⁷

In other words, Prince is in effect saying: ‘Don’t dwell too much on your moral failures. Whenever you fall into sin, don’t worry about it. You don’t have to confess it since all your sins have already been forgiven. Instead, remind yourselves that you are already righteous in Christ.’ It is just such an approach that potentially can lead followers of this new antinomianism to take their sins lightly. Mattera has observed that ‘Those attending a hyper-grace church will most likely find that, because of the strong emphasis on grace – with no teaching against sin or on repentance, judgement or hell – there is an atmosphere of loose living, with many involved in sexual immorality and drunkenness as well as other physical vices.’³⁸

Moreover, Steve McVey teaches that the Holy Spirit not only does not convict believers of their sins. He does not even convict nonbelievers of their sins! In a remarkable paragraph in his book entitled *52 Lies Heard in Church Every Sunday*, McVey writes:

It is pointless to hope or pray that the Holy Spirit will convict an unbeliever of the things they are doing wrong. He’s not going to do that for the simple reason: Their sins are not the problem. Christ died with their sins on the cross. When He said, ‘It is finished’, He was including the world, not just those who have already believed the gospel.³⁹

A picture is clearly emerging here. The new antinomians do not want their followers to dwell on sin. They try to push sin away to the periphery. Instead, they prefer to concentrate on divine grace and the righteousness that Christ has imputed on the believer. If this is their strategy, it should not surprise us that they have a distorted concept of repentance. For the new antinomians, repentance has nothing to do with expressing remorse for the sins we have

³⁷ Prince, *Destined to Reign*, 135.

³⁸ Mattera, ‘8 Signs of “Hypergrace” Churches’, *Charisma*, <http://www.charismamag.com/spirit/spiritual-growth/18158-8-signs-of-hypergrace-churches>, assessed 10 November 2015.

³⁹ McVey, *52 Lies Heard in Church Every Sunday: And Why the Truth is So Much Better* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2011), 39.

committed. Repentance is merely about changing our minds. Steve McVey explains:

What is repentance? Many people confuse it with remorse, which is to feel badly about something you've done ... Although this view is common, it's not what the Bible means by repentance.⁴⁰

For the new antinomians, repentance is merely a change of one's mind, a recognition and acknowledgement that one will always be righteous in Christ.

Now although *metanoia* has to do with a change of mind, it means much more. It refers to a change of mind that results from an acknowledgement and abhorrence of one's sin. Thus, seen negatively, the 'change of mind' that is repentance has to do with an existential and moral conversion away from sin and evil. Positively, it has to do with the resolve to live a life of obedience to God's Word.

The New Testament speaks clearly and consistently about confessing our sins to God. In 1 John 2:1, we read: 'My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One.' Here, John is writing to Christians, not to Gnostics. He reminds the Christian community that if any member should sin, he has an advocate in Jesus Christ. That is to say, Christians who sin can come to the Father through Jesus Christ, repent of their sins, and receive divine forgiveness. Thus, we recall 1:9 where John writes: 'If we confess our sin, he is faithful and just to forgive our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness'. The New Testament not only teaches that repentance, confession and the resolve to live the life of obedience apply to believers in the new covenant; they are things that Christians should do daily.

THE CROSS OF CHRIST

We turn our attention now to the most important emphasis of the new antinomians, namely, the finished work of Christ on the cross. The cross of Christ is at the very centre of the theology of the new antinomians or the promoters of the false grace doctrine. Their concepts of salvation, sin, forgiveness, prosperity and healing, and the victory of the Christian are based on their understanding of what Christ has accomplished on the cross. In the main, the new antinomians emphasise that the death of Christ on the cross has settled everything for the believer. All the believer needs to do is to accept

⁴⁰ Ibid., 116.

Christ by faith, and receive everything that God has to offer in Christ. Their theology of the cross stresses the significance of the last words of Christ on the cross before he died: 'It is finished' (*tetelestai*, John 19:30).

But what do the new antinomians take these words of Christ to mean? In his book *Look! The Finished Work of Jesus*, Mick Mooney asserts that 'We only need to believe upon Jesus for whom he truly is and our works obligation to God is perfectly fulfilled.'⁴¹ Joseph Prince, a strong advocate of this teaching, repeatedly emphasises the finished work of Christ throughout his writings and sermons. For example, in a devotional piece on his website, Prince writes:

Today, it is not our works that will bring us the blessings. It is Christ's finished work. Christian living is not about doing, but believing in His finished work. Under the law, we must do. Under grace, it is done! ... My friend, the work is finished. The victory is won. Our enemies have been made His footstool. Our blessings have been bought by His blood! Live life knowing that there is nothing for you to do – only believe! It is finished!⁴²

In *Unmerited Favour*, Prince argues that because believers fail to understand the significance of what Christ has accomplished on the cross, they have become victims of error or 'wrong beliefs.' And by their erroneous beliefs, these believers are guilty of 'cheapening grace and the finished work of Jesus.'⁴³ Here Prince has turned the teaching of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (and therefore orthodox Christianity) on its head. Prince argues that when we emphasise sine and repentance, we cheapen God's grace. However, orthodox teaching about grace says the exact opposite. In his book, *Cost of Discipleship* Bonhoeffer describes cheap grace as:

the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.⁴⁴

In other words, according to Bonhoeffer and orthodox Christian teaching, it is the new antinomians that are peddling cheap grace to their followers.

⁴¹ Mick Mooney, *Look! The Finished Work of Jesus* (Scotts Valley, California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), 43.

⁴² Joseph Prince, 'It is Finished!', Dec 31 2014, <http://www.josephprince.org/daily-grace/grace-inspirations/single/it-is-finished/>, assessed 23 November 2015.

⁴³ Prince, *Unmerited Favour*, 182.

⁴⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959), 36.

According to the new antinomians, the accomplished work of Christ on the cross means that we must preach only the positive side of the message of salvation. They reject any negative preaching, that is, preaching that highlights sin or makes reference to the wrath of God or to hell. As Paul Ellis has put it so clearly in his blog article: ‘The condemnation of hell has no place in the gospel of grace.’ In the same article, he adds: ‘Jesus’ gospel was not, “Come to God or you’ll burn in hell”, but “God’s kingdom is at hand and you can participate in it”.’⁴⁵ The approach of the new antinomians is typically selective and partial. They have essentially excised the passages on God’s wrath and judgement and emphasise only the positive aspects of the biblical witness.

The new antinomians have also carefully worked out the implications of their own theology of the cross. However, in so doing they have merely succeeded in multiplying their errors. Firstly, because Jesus has finished his work for human salvation on the cross, God has forgiven the sins of the believer who has put his faith in Jesus. As we have seen, the new antinomians teach that God has forgiven *all* the sins of the believer – past, present and future. It is therefore not necessary for the believer to repeatedly ask for God’s forgiveness. God has already done that. All the believer needs to do is to thank God that his sins are forgiven in Christ. In *Destined to Reign*, Joseph Prince writes:

My friend, righteousness is a gift because of what Jesus has accomplished on the cross for you. All your sins – past, present and future – have been washed clean by his precious blood. You are completely forgiven and from the moment you received Jesus into your life, you will never be held liable for your sins ever again. You have been made as righteous as Jesus not through your behaviour, but by faith in him and his finished work on the cross.⁴⁶

Now, it is not that the new antinomians think that sin is not a serious matter. Just a few paragraphs after the above quotation, Prince wrote these words, printed in bold: ‘I, Joseph Prince, am vehemently, completely, aggressively and irrevocably **AGAINST SIN**.’⁴⁷ Sin should be taken seriously. It is an evil. But to the believer – and this is an important qualification that the teachers of this new doctrine of grace make – sin is inconsequential because it has been dealt with and forgiven. Thus, since the blood of Jesus has washed away all the sins of believers – past, present and future – it would be wrong for

⁴⁵ Paul Ellis, ‘What About Hell? 10 Things to Know’, *Escape to Reality*, April 23, 2013, <http://escapetoreality.org/2013/04/23/what-about-hell/>, accessed 26 November 2015.

⁴⁶ Prince, *Destined to Reign*, 28-9.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

believers to dwell on them. Prince gives this remarkable counsel: ‘Don’t uncover your sins or the sins of others. They have been completely forgiven by the blood of Jesus.’⁴⁸ Even God is unable to see your sins anymore. Prince writes: ‘Let me say it one more time to make sure that you did not miss it: God cannot see your sins when they are covered by the blood.’⁴⁹ This is why believers should not pray ‘Forgive us our trespasses.’ The Lord’s Prayer is not for believers because Jesus taught the prayer to his disciples before the cross. It belongs to the old covenant.

Secondly, because of the accomplished work of Christ on the cross, the believer can enjoy effortless victory in the Christian life. There is no need for believers to examine themselves to see if they have fallen short of God’s moral laws or if there is any sin festering in their lives that needs to be dealt with. In fact, Christians need not think about their sins at all! Here are more remarkable statements by the author of *Destined to Reign*:

Contrary to what you might have been taught, God does not keep an itemised account of all your failures. There is no big screen in heaven to show all your sins from the day you were born to the day you return to heaven. All records of your sins have been incinerated by the blood of Jesus when He cried out, ‘It is finished’. His blood has removed the sins of your entire life. When God looks at you today, he sees you covered with Jesus’ blood and completely righteous. *Only the devil, you yourself and the people around you will bring your sins to your remembrance.*⁵⁰

When you are under grace, even when you fail and fall short of God’s standards, God still sees you as righteous because of Jesus Christ.⁵¹

I do not deny that sin must be punished, but I am declaring to you that all your sins have already been punished on the body of Jesus. He is your perfect sin offering and *we who have received his forgiveness should have no more consciousness of sins. Stop examining yourself and searching your heart for sin.*⁵²

Finally, because of what Christ has done on the cross, God can no longer be angry with Christians. Furthermore, the new antinomians teach that even if

⁴⁸ Ibid., 211.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 209.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 98.

⁵¹ Ibid., 146.

⁵² Ibid., 187.

we sin God will never chastise us. Again, the clearest exposition of this idea comes from the pen of Joseph Prince. In *Destined to Reign*, he writes: ‘My friend, do you see an angry God today, or a God who is smiling and ready to embrace you? Because of Jesus’ finished work, we are no longer under the covenant of law where God is happy with you sometimes and angry with you at other times. *Today, he is always well-pleased with you because of Jesus Christ.*⁵³ Because of Christ’s finished work, believers in the new covenant will never experience the wrath of God. They will never be chastised or judged by God. Thus, Prince could write, combining his hyper-grace theology with the health and wealth ‘gospel’: ‘So how can anyone have the audacity to say that God will still chastise us with sickness, diseases and accidents today? To say this is to negate the finished work of Jesus Christ! Under the new covenant, God will never again chastise the believer for his sins!’⁵⁴

Under the new covenant, believers never ever have to be concerned about sin or the wrath of God. Because of what Christ has done, God has forgiven all our sins. He does not see our sins anymore, and he does not judge or chastise us when we sin. Prince sums this teaching up nicely thus: ‘Because of Jesus’ finished work at the cross, he will never be angry with you nor rebuke you even when you fail. So don’t ever forget the main clause of the new covenant, which says that your sins and your lawless deeds, he remembers no more!’⁵⁵ According to these teachers of radical grace, God can never be angry with us. Because of what Christ has accomplished on the cross, God is in a good mood all the time! Hyper-grace teacher Chuck Crisco explains this clearly in his book *Extraordinary Gospel*:

The good news ... is that he is happy in his relationship with you because of what Christ has done. He has established you in a state that brings him immense joy because he has established you ‘in Christ.’ Even when his children make mistakes, are immature and fail, Father God wants you to believe he is not manic depressive in his heart toward you. He is not angry one minute, indifferent the next and then glad when you finally get it right. No, there is an abiding joyful attitude toward us. God is in a good mood.⁵⁶

Needless to say, the teachings of the Bible are radically different. Writing to the Church in Ephesus, Paul gives this stern warning: ‘But among you there

⁵³ Ibid., 40-41.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 65.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 305.

⁵⁶ Chuck Crisco, *Extraordinary Gospel: Experiencing the Goodness of God* (Travelers Rest, South Carolina: True Potential Media, 2013), 23. In his earlier book *God is in a Good Mood: Discovering How Good Life Can Be*, Crisco asks, ‘What if God is in party mode all the time?’ (n.p.: Simply B, 2011), Kindle location, 131.

must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people ... No immoral, impure or greedy person – such a man is an idolator – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes to those who are disobedient. Therefore, do not be partners with them' (Ephesians 5:3-7). Paul is exhorting the Christians in Ephesus to be watchful over their lives and to be careful to root out any sin that might disqualify them from the kingdom. In the same way, the writer of Hebrews warns: 'See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness' (Hebrews 3:12-13).

CONCLUSION

In his book entitled *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth*, evangelical theologian Alister McGrath defines heresy as: 'A form of Christian belief that, more by accident than design, ultimately ends up subverting, destabilising, or even destroying the core of the Christian faith.'⁵⁷ Leaving aside the question of whether these new antinomians have come to their doctrine of grace by accident or by design, the issue that needs to be seriously addressed is whether their theology can be said to have subverted, destabilised or even destroyed the core of the Christian faith. Put in another way, does this new doctrine of grace undermine the Gospel of Jesus Christ? It is my view that it does, and therefore should be regarded not simply as a minor aberration but as heresy.

To be sure, commentators like Michael Brown have taken pains to emphasise that there is much truth in what these new teachers of grace have to say about grace. This should be of no surprise because most heresies are admixtures of truth and error – that is why they are so dangerous. What needs to be pointed out here is that the new antinomians have not only gone a little overboard with their emphasis on grace. As we have seen in this brief survey, their teachings have radically distorted orthodox Christianity in so many significant ways that what they propose must be regarded as an altogether different gospel (Galatians 1:6-8):

1. They have dismissed the whole of the OT. Narratives in the OT are merely used as examples and illustrations.
2. They have dismissed the relevance of the Ten Commandments and God's moral law for Christians.

⁵⁷ Alister McGrath, *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth* (New York: Harper One, 2009), 11-12.

3. Their doctrine of God is erroneous because they have emphasised some of his attributes (his love and grace) and excluded others.
4. Their Christology is defective. For them salvation is centred only on the death of Christ on the cross (Irenaeus and the Fathers of the Church teach that the whole incarnate life of the Son is salvific).
5. Their understanding of the ministry and teachings of Jesus is erroneous because they consider the teachings of Jesus before Calvary as irrelevant for Christians (these include the Sermon on the Mount, the parables and the Lord's Prayer).
6. Their pneumatology is erroneous because they teach that the Holy Spirit does not convict believers of sin.
7. Their understanding of the writings of Paul is erroneous. Paul always balances between the indicative and the imperative (you are such and such, therefore, you should do this). But the new antinomians only emphasise the indicative and dismissed entirely the imperative in Paul's writings.
8. Their soteriology is erroneous because they teach that it is impossible for believers to ever lose their salvation.⁵⁸
9. Their eschatology is erroneous because they present an over-realised eschatology when they say that Christians are already perfect.
10. Needless to say, their theology of the Christian life is erroneous.
11. The new antinomians are also promoters of the health and wealth Gospel. They incorporate prosperity teaching into their theology of grace.

Although the new antinomians appeal to Paul as their mentor, their use of Paul is utilitarian and selective. One of the most powerful passages in the Pauline corpus on the Christian life and the Christian's ultimate salvation is found in the epistle to the Philippians. Here, the apostle Paul – the church's greatest teacher of grace! – could write: 'Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Philippians 2: 12-13).

⁵⁸ As far as I know, the new antinomians have not presented a comprehensive and sophisticated soteriology (doctrine of salvation). Concepts like God's eternal decree and predestination – so foundational to Calvinistic and Reformed soteriology – are seldom even mentioned in the writings of the new antinomians. In the same way, one would look in vain to find any serious treatment of the 'order of salvation' (*ordo salutis*) in their works. They seem to simply insist that once someone confesses that Jesus Christ is his Saviour and Lord, his salvation is eternally secured and no matter what he does it cannot be forfeited. Their approach can therefore be said to be a species of 'easy believism'. But it is obvious that the antinomianism espoused by the new antinomians *requires* such a view of salvation.

I think among all the commentators of these verses, it is John Wesley who has arguably given the most succinct interpretation. In his sermon 'On Working Out Our Own Salvation' (1785), Wesley wrote:

First, God worketh in you; therefore you can work – otherwise it would be impossible. If he did not work it would be impossible for you to work out your own salvation. Secondly, God worketh in you; therefore you must work: you must be 'workers together with him' (they are the very words of the Apostle); otherwise he will cease working.⁵⁹

This is the 'responsible grace' that the Bible teaches and which the new antinomians roundly reject.

Dr Roland Chia is Chew Hock Hin Professor of Christian Doctrine at Trinity Theological College and Theological and Research Advisor at the Ethos Institute for Public Christianity.

⁵⁹ John Wesley, 'On Working Out Our Own Salvation', https://biblehub.com/library/wesley/sermons_on_several_occasions/sermon_85_on_working_out.htm. Accessed 15 November 2015.