

**Sons Without Discipline:**  
**The Deficient Holiness of 17<sup>th</sup> Century Antinomianism**

Harley J. Schwartz

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## Introduction – A Pleasant By-Way

The King's Highway is a highway of holiness. It is not an easy highway, and so the devil has set up a By-Way along the King's Highway that seems easier on the feet. It is a doctrine that says, "You are justified. You are sinless. God sees no sin in you. Christ makes all your works perfect. Therefore, any motivation to holiness from reward or punishment is legalism and puts one back under the Law, and your only motives should be Gospel-centered motives." This doctrine surfaced in early 17<sup>th</sup> century England, and many today would think that if any doctrine would make a man holy, it would be this one. This paper will explain the antinomian tenet from prime historical publications, the ecclesiastical and world situation in which this tenet arose, and how the antinomians came to this doctrine. The paper will then prove that it did not produce real holiness, and that it cannot produce real holiness, and show where antinomianism exists today.

Two infamous characters who espoused the above-mentioned doctrine were John Eaton and Robert Towne, fit representatives for the most popular tenets. Although as Mark Jones remarks, 17<sup>th</sup> century English antinomianism was composed of a spectrum of errors with differing degrees of seriousness,<sup>1</sup> Eaton and Towne enjoy prominence. For one, many consider John Eaton the father of 17<sup>th</sup> century antinomianism (i.e. Eatonism);<sup>2</sup> the Westminster Assembly had petitioned the House of Commons for investigation of Eaton's *The Honey-Combe*<sup>3</sup> and *The*

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Jones, *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest?* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 7.

<sup>2</sup> David R. Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 176.

<sup>3</sup> It is said of this work that it "has no rival as a systematic and documented statement of seventeenth-century English antinomian opinion." T.D. Bozeman, "The Glory of the 'Third Time': John Eaton as Contra-Puritan," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 47, no. 4 (1996): 642.

*Dangerous Dead Faith*,<sup>4</sup> and the person Mr. Towne, among others;<sup>5</sup> their brand of “imputative” antinomianism was the most widespread, and the most referenced by the Puritans.<sup>6</sup>

### **Eatonism – A Reformed Restoration Movement?**

Eatonism came into England at a revolutionary time. It is difficult to decisively conclude how the movement started, although historians believe with some dispute that John Eaton was a prominent early influencer.<sup>7</sup> John Eaton was born in 1575, only fifty-eight years after Martin Luther had nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the University of Wittenberg. Reformation doctrine was still fresh in the public mind. Since the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559 there had existed Protestantism with disputed practices.<sup>8</sup> As a vicar himself,<sup>9</sup> Eaton would have been firsthand witness to the Puritan efforts to further purify a partially-reformed church. It is fertile soil for ideas as the church learns to live with Reformed doctrine.

The pious strength of the Puritan preaching and writing of the day would inevitably prompt an antinomian response. David Como in his authoritative work *Blown by the Spirit* draws attention to the constant calls for self-examination, warnings against false repentance, and the dangers of dead faith; in which environment antinomianism arose. He notes that the Puritan

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<sup>4</sup> John Eaton died in 1641 and so was not personally summoned.

<sup>5</sup> Chad Van Dixhoorn et al., eds., *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643-1652*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1:22-23. This petition was issued August 10, 1643.

<sup>6</sup> Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 178.

<sup>7</sup> Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 81.

<sup>8</sup> Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power, Vol. 4: The Age of Religious Conflict* (Ross-shire, Scotland, UK: Christian Focus Publications, Ltd, 2016), 183.

<sup>9</sup> Whitney G. Gamble, *Christ and the Law: Antinomianism at the Westminster Assembly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2018), 14.

mixing of doubt with faith (as he sees it) put people into a “state of bondage, insecurity, and fear.”<sup>10</sup>

John Eaton believed that legalism had corrupted the Reformed message,<sup>11</sup> and that all the ministers of his day who stressed holiness were tainting the message of free grace with damning legalism.<sup>12</sup> Importantly, Como notes that Eatonists did not believe they presented anything new—they were the true heirs of the Reformation. Both Eaton and Towne quote Calvin, Ursinus, Beza, and especially Martin Luther, who is cited over a hundred times by John Eaton in his two prominent works.<sup>13</sup> Eaton not only saw himself as walking the old Reformed paths, but as a *restorer* of the old paths.<sup>14</sup>

In some respects the Eatonists were near Puritan angels of light. John Eaton believed in preaching the law to the unconverted “...*in thundering and lightening, and terrible earth-quake, and flaming fire...* to break in pieces the hard stones, that lie secure in the least sin.”<sup>15</sup> He could tell how close a hypocrite comes to looking like a Christian.<sup>16</sup> He could replicate standard Reformed doctrine with “frightening precision.”<sup>17</sup> So how is this Almost-Puritan discovered?

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<sup>10</sup> Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 121-122.

<sup>11</sup> Gamble, *Christ and the Law*, 14-15.

<sup>12</sup> Both of Eaton’s works *The Honey-Combe* and *The Dangerous Dead Faith* are filled with such rants.

<sup>13</sup> Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 185.

<sup>14</sup> Bozeman, “Glory of the ‘Third Time’”: 643.

<sup>15</sup> Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 180, quoting John Eaton, *The Honey-Combe of Free Justification by Christ Alone* (London: R. Bishop, 1642), 124-125, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2248567048/fulltextPDF/42544A0ED899466CPQ/1?accountid=208573>. Italics here and in later Como quotes are Como’s.

<sup>16</sup> Norman B. Graebner, “Protestants and Dissenters: An Examination of the Seventeenth-Century Eatonist and New England Antinomian Controversies in Reformation Perspective” (PhD diss., Duke University, Durham, NC, 1984), 148.

<sup>17</sup> Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 181-182.

## The Links in the Chain

### Covenantal Foundation

There is a covenant framework underlying Eaton's views that resembles dispensationalism. Eaton's view is that the way of salvation varies between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. Under the Old Covenant one is justified only if they perfectly obey the law; under the New Covenant justification is by free grace. In the Old Testament, God punishes eagerly and severely; in the gospel-rich New Testament age God no longer uses the pedagogy of the Law. The times of Christ were a time of quasi-terror, and so passages like the Sermon on the Mount belong to the Old Covenant times, and are not fitting for Christians today.<sup>18</sup> This strain of a law-grace antithesis fuels antinomian theology, even to the point of warping divine essence.

### God Sees no Sin in the Believer

Eatonist error is founded on a major qualifier to the omniscience of God, inferring from justification that God does not see a believer's sins. Eaton, as quoted by Como, says, "...so true faith of *free Justification*... Alone doth truly abolish all filthy nakedness of our sins out of God's sight, and it alone doth make us perfectly holy, and sufficiently righteous in the sight of God freely, without works."<sup>19</sup> Theodore Bozeman notes that Eaton advocates for a "change... in the divine cognition," and "no pretense or legal fiction but a potently real event." Per Eaton, "not imaginarily to count us, but *to make us*" pure before God.<sup>20</sup> Robert Towne in *The Assertion of Grace* vociferously argues against Dr. Thomas Taylor that a believer's sins are kept out of God's

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<sup>18</sup> Gamble, *Christ and the Law*, 17-18. The paragraph up until this point is attributable to Gamble.

<sup>19</sup> Como, *Blown by the Spirit*, 183.

<sup>20</sup> Eaton, *Honey-Combe*, 285, cited in Bozeman, "Glory of the 'Third Time'": 645. Italics are Bozeman's.

sight. When Dr. Taylor argues “*There is a simple eye and knowledge of God, whereby he cannot but see all things,*” Towne evasively replies, “What God is in his simple nature... is further above our comprehensio [sic] then the heaven is above our heads.” He then argues that if sin is before God’s all-knowing sight, then sin must be eternal with God.<sup>21</sup> When pressed, “*What God makes [believers] see in themselves, himself must necessarily see,*” Towne says, “If this argument hold, then God must confesse and bewail sin, as well as see sin.”<sup>22</sup> Ergo, God cannot see the sins that believers commit.

The grounds of this position—amazingly—are legalistic grounds.<sup>23</sup> Answering an objection that it is error “*That God is not displeased with the sins of the justified,*” Towne replies that if God could not spare vengeance on His only begotten Son, how could He spare it on His adopted sons?<sup>24</sup> He argues that the mediation of Christ “banish[es], and keep[s] away continually all the evils and failings of his peculiar from the sight and presence of His Father...”<sup>25</sup> If God sees the sin, He must punish it as He punished Christ; to prevent this, Christ’s mediation keeps the Father in the dark on a believer’s sins. It follows that there is no atonement.

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Towne, *The Assertion of Grace*, (UK: 1644), 98-99, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2248510797/A0E9D380DD47463FPQ/3?accountid=208573>. This is a polemical response, as according to the title “[contains] an Answer to that Book, entituled, *The rule of the Law under the Gospel, etc.* Which Book set forth by Dr. Taylor is shewed to be full of both of scandal and danger...” All Taylor quotes in this paper are as quoted by Towne.

<sup>22</sup> Towne, *Assertion*, 102. Italics in original for this Towne quote and all other Towne quotes in this paper.

<sup>23</sup> Gamble, *Christ and the Law*, 199.

<sup>24</sup> Towne, *Assertion*, 106.

<sup>25</sup> Towne, *Assertion*, 107.

## The Actually Sinless Works of Believers

They argue that believers' works are perfect and sinless in themselves. Whitney Gamble summarizes Towne by saying, "...God's nature as righteous judge would not allow for Him to accept anything less than perfection; once Christ's perfect righteousness was imputed, the believer's works done after justification could only be seen as perfect in God's sight. For Towne, *justification and sanctification essentially became fused.*"<sup>26</sup> John Eaton asserts the perfection of a believer's works by saying, "...not only we our persons, but also all our works... are by free Justification made so pure and clean... and thereby so acceptable and perfectly well-pleasing to God..." though qualifying that this justification of "our persons and works" is by faith alone.<sup>27</sup> Christ's work post-conversion is efficacious not by propitiating the sins of God's people, but making the works themselves fully acceptable to God—by faith alone; but this angel of light in truth puts his hearers under the slavery of Romans 7:5, killing all possibility of holiness.

## What's There to Punish?

If all pre-conversion sins are washed away, and God sees no sin in the believer, and if all of the believer's works are made perfect, what is there to punish? Nothing. Towne concludes so himself, saying, "...Christ remaineth forever a Mediatour between God and his Church, speaking perpetually peace by virtue of his blood, thereby banishing... all the evils and failings of his peculiar from the sight and presence of his Father... Christ doth not reconcile us to God, and

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<sup>26</sup> Gamble, *Christ and the Law*, 119. Italics added.

<sup>27</sup> John Eaton, *The Discovery of the Most Dangerous Dead Faith* (London: R. Bishop, 1642), 173-176. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2264218480/fulltextPDF/AF3275B0BBF84342PQ/1?accountid=208573>.

then leave us in danger of procuring Gods displeasure by our after failings and backslidings.”<sup>28</sup>  
Therefore, a chastised believer is really under the Law.<sup>29</sup>

One might object, “Then what about the Corinthians who died after partaking unworthily; or the Ephesians who were prodded to repentance under threat of desertion; or Hebrews 12 where God chastises His children as a faithful father?” Towne unfoundedly asserts those Corinthians were unconverted;<sup>30</sup> Eaton says the same of the Ephesians.<sup>31</sup> At Hebrews 12, Towne without explanation reproachfully dismisses Dr. Taylor.<sup>32</sup> Eaton answers that God speaks to collections of persons with the language of chastisement because the church contains both the converted and the unconverted, but the intended effect isn’t the same. The affliction to the unconverted is for sin; but those *joyful* at the spoiling of their goods are not under discipline.<sup>33</sup>

As for reward, the believer has all the reward he ever needs in Christ. “So that where Christ’s righteousness is, there is both regard and reward, but not for any worth or value in workes... but that faith in Christ, is the onely gemme of price which is honoured and recompensed by God...”<sup>34</sup> As to motivation from punishment, concerning some who “[rob] Christ the glory of the *chastisement of our peace...*” Eaton says, “they come to bee chastised in

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<sup>28</sup> Towne, *Assertion*, 106-107.

<sup>29</sup> Eaton, *Honeycombe*, 125.

<sup>30</sup> Towne, *Assertion*, 114, “and why may it not be said that these *Corinthians* so chastised for unworthy receiving, did but dally with the Gospel, and did not truly and actually put on Christ and his righteousness?”

<sup>31</sup> Eaton, *Honeycombe*, 122.

<sup>32</sup> Towne, *Assertion*, 111.

<sup>33</sup> Eaton, *Honeycombe*, 133-135. Como also cites in *Blown by the Spirit*, 197.

<sup>34</sup> Towne, *Assertion*, 95.



hell, where, I dare warrant them, they shall have corrections enough, and nothing but just and due correction for their sins.”<sup>35</sup>

### **How to *Really* Become Holy**

Now how does a Christian become holy by their scheme? Says Eaton, “*That this true faith of free justification is a thing of perfect vertue, and wonderfull operation, strength and power, to bring forth all good motivations and good works: or else it is not the true, lively, justifying faith...*”<sup>36</sup> Towne, answering Dr. Taylor’s assertion that in addition to inward principles there are “*externall helps not to be neglected whereby [believers] are fruitful,*” answers, “Meanes of revealing Christ, and nourishing Faith, we stand and call for more earnestly then you; how is it like then that we should be barren and idle in our profession?”<sup>37</sup> They assert this principle frequently in their works. Per Bozeman, the work of grace in the Eatonist scheme makes morality “virtually automatic.” In these times a believer “‘cannot but chuse’ to control themselves and to perform good works.” These good works come “of their own accord,” they “‘voluntarily [flow]’ from relief and joy,” and “moral action pours so readily, indeed so ‘infallibly.’”<sup>38</sup> Eatonist sanctification, then, is near-effortless.

The idea itself of good works flowing from thankfulness for justification is nothing unique to Eaton and Towne. The Puritan Thomas Brooks says, “*That those ... now triumphing in heaven, did look upon the mercy of God as the most powerful argument to preserve them from*

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<sup>35</sup> Eaton, *Honeycombe*, 140. Italics in original and all following Eaton quotes unless stated otherwise.

<sup>36</sup> Eaton, *Dangerous Death Faith*, 156-157.

<sup>37</sup> Towne, *Assertion*, 132.

<sup>38</sup> Bozeman, “Glory of the ‘Third Time’”: 648, quoting *Honey-Combe*, 75, 466, 474, 78. The author agrees with the sense put on these quotes by Bozeman.

*sin...*”<sup>39</sup> John Owen in the *Mortification of Sin* states, the only act of a Christian *efficacious* to the killing of sin is to “Set faith at work on Christ for the *killing* of [his] sin.” All other motives in his book are merely preparatory.<sup>40</sup> The Westminster Assembly agreed when writing in WCF XIV.2, that, “the principal acts of saving faith are, accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life...”<sup>41</sup> However, the Puritans disagreed that this was the *only* motive, and disagreed that God never chastises the believer.

Once one understands Eatonism, they will find responses to Eatonism permeating the Westminster Standards. As mentioned earlier, the Westminster Assembly had called for investigation into the work of Mr. Eaton, and the person of Mr. Towne, among other known antinomians.<sup>42</sup> They wasted no time in investigating, as the Assembly commenced on July 1, 1643, and on September 14 the Assembly received referral to “compare the Opinions of the Antinomians with the Word of God and with the Articles of the Church of England.”<sup>43</sup> This next section reports and explains the Westminster Assembly’s response.

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Brooks, “Precious Remedies Against Satan’s Devices,” in *The Complete Works of Thomas Brooks*, Vol. 1, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1866), 30. Italics are original. Brooks leaves no doubt in the rest of his book as to the legitimacy of motives from reward, punishment, or consequence.

<sup>40</sup> John Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, 2nd ed. (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1658, UK), Ch. XIV.1, <https://ccel.org/ccel/owen/mort/>. Chapters I to XIII are not shy on what Eatonists would call “legalistic” motives.

<sup>41</sup> William S. Young, ed., *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, Edinburgh Edition (Philadelphia, 1851), Accessed via Logos Bible Software. XIV:2.

<sup>42</sup> Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> Van Dixhoorn, *Minutes*, 121.

## The Assembly Answers

### The Covenantal Response

Covenant theology was already a contested subject during the Reformation, but nonetheless the Westminster Standards explain the substance of the Old and New Covenants in a fashion that exclude John Eaton's exceedingly strict law/grace covenantal dichotomy. The Westminster Standards teach one Covenant of Grace throughout redemptive history, with only the form of administration changing. Following the Fall, per WCF VII.3, "...the Lord was pleased to make a second [covenant], commonly called the Covenant of Grace." The Confession specifies that the Covenant was in effect through the Old and New Covenants. Per VII.4, "This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the Gospel." It clarifies that the Old Testament ordinances "[built] up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and this is called the Old Testament." Westminster Larger Catechism questions 33 and 34 repeat this substance, while WLC 31 clarifies that "The covenant of grace is made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed."<sup>44</sup>

While Eaton preaches a Christless and legalistic salvation for Old Testament saints, the Westminster divines propagate for the Old Testament saint an enjoyment of Christ and His benefits no less real and actual than those of New Testament Christians, even if some benefits differ in degree. WCF XI.6 teaches, "The justification of believers under the Old Testament was, in all these respects, one and the same with the justification of believers under the New Testament."<sup>45</sup> This view kills suspicion that God in the Old Testament is unloving, ungracious,

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<sup>44</sup> Young, *The Westminster*, WCF VII.3, 4, WLC 31, 33, 34.

<sup>45</sup> Young, *Westminster*, XI.6.

severe, ruling by a burdensome law; the Standards maintain that the commandment per Romans 7:12 is “holy and just and good.” It is one and the same gracious God in one covenant offering the same salvation by the same means to attain it.

### The Confession on Justification

The Confession knows nothing of the purity and sinlessness of a believer’s works deterring the wrath of God. The Eatonist asserts that Christ makes the works of a believer to be sinless and perfect; yet the Confession states that a Christian is justified per WCF XI.1 “by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous: not for any thing wrought in them, or done by them, but for Christ’s sake alone.”<sup>46</sup> The believer’s own works have no place in any manner. The only works which count for anything in this justification are those of Christ. Per WCF XI.3, “his obedience and satisfaction [are] accepted in their stead...”<sup>47</sup>

God does see a believer’s sins. While it is clear in WCF XI.5 that believers may never lose their justification, they can fall under the Father’s chastisement on account of their sins, and not see His favor restored to them until they “renew their faith and repentance.”<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, God’s cognizance of a Christian’s sins in no way impacts justification. Bless God for it.

### The Confession on Good Works

The Eatonists accused their contemporaries of teaching salvation by works with their stress on holiness and good works. It is clear in WCF XVI is that there is *no* merit in the works

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<sup>46</sup> Young, *Westminster*, XI.1.

<sup>47</sup> Young, *Westminster*, XI.3.

<sup>48</sup>Young, *Westminster*, XI.5.

of a believer. Section 5 says, “We cannot, by our best works, merit pardon of sin, or eternal life, at the hand of God... whom by them we can neither profit nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins...” Furthermore, “as they are good, they proceed from His Spirit; and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God’s judgment.”<sup>49</sup> The only acceptable obedience that the Westminster Divines expected they could give was only the Spirit-wrought good accepted through Christ per WCF XVI.6. It is all Christ down to the last penny.

The section also addresses automated sanctification. Acknowledging that the influence of the Spirit is necessary for good works in WCF XVI.3, “yet are they not hereupon to grow negligent, as if they were not bound to perform any duty, unless upon a special motion of the Spirit; but they ought to be diligent in stirring up the grace of God that is in them.”<sup>50</sup> This section should be read closely with WCF XVII, which follows, on the dangerous consequences of an automated view of holiness.

### The Link of Diligence, Peace, and Assurance

As one reads Eaton one would think that grace is so overwhelmingly powerful in the Christian that he’s likely never to fall into grievous sin; and even if he does, it should hardly shake his peace. The Confession blasts this romanticized idea, teaching that a Christian can indeed fall into such a sin that spurs the Father’s anger and hinders their progress. Per WCF XVII.3 a Christian may by “neglect of the means of their preservation...” that is, watchfulness,<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Young, *Westminster*, XVI.5.

<sup>50</sup> Young, *Westminster*, XVI.3.

<sup>51</sup> Young, *Westminster*, V.5.

word, sacraments, prayer,<sup>52</sup> “fall into grievous sins; and for a time continue therein: whereby they incur God’s displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit; come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts... and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.” WCF V.5 reiterates the same, that God may “chastise [believers] for their former sins... to make the more watchful against all future occasions of sin...”<sup>53</sup> The Divines reiterate the same in XVIII.4 on assurance when they say, “True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it; by falling into some special sin, which woundeth the conscience, and grieveth the Spirit...”<sup>54</sup> Failure to be diligent per WCF XVI.3, to fail to exercise faith, intentionally walk in holiness, watch against sin, or use the means of grace, puts the believer at risk of committing such a sin as will grieve the Spirit, shake his peace, and perhaps leave him to commit greater sins, and such a chastisement that none but the hardened can fail to smart for.

### The Confession and The Law of God

The Divines have no scruples to let the Law of God provide motives besides “evangelical”<sup>55</sup> motives. In WCF XIX.6 the Law “is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions... and the threatenings of it to show... what afflictions in this life they may expect for them, although freed from the curses thereof threatened in the law.” It concludes that performing good and fighting sin because of promises or threats “is no evidence of his being

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<sup>52</sup> Young, *Westminster*, WLC 154.

<sup>53</sup> Young, *Westminster*, V.5.

<sup>54</sup> Young, *Westminster*, XVIII.4.

<sup>55</sup> That is, only those flowing from free grace, justification, God’s love—all things done for us.

under the law, and not under grace.” These are not anti-Gospel motives, but rather per section 7 “do sweetly comply with it.”<sup>56</sup>

For all of this, it may be hard to conceive that a Christian should be motivated by anything other than “evangelical” motives. Why couldn’t Gospel motives by themselves produce superior holiness? The next question is, does this work? One could begin to answer the question by looking at the proponents.

### **Eatonism Does not Work**

#### **Its Proponents and Disciples**

If one reads the works of John Eaton and Robert Towne, one will see their views did not work for them, since one knows a tree by its fruits. Their works are filled with railing accusations. They mock their opponents as puffed up in their own learning. The arguments and quotations are dishonest, and the replies are occasionally plain evasive.<sup>57</sup> One can hardly miss the arrogance when John Eaton compares his opponents to Ahab’s false prophets, of whom one struck Micaiah on the cheek and asked, “Since when did the Spirit of God leave me to speak to you?”<sup>58</sup> Contemporary ministers likewise assessed antinomian ringleaders with wicked manner in behavior. Giles and Simpson, other prominent antinomians, were described by the Assembly as acting during private interviews with “arrogance & impudence.”<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Young, *Westminster*, XIX.6 and 7.

<sup>57</sup> Although secondary sources have noted the derogatory tone of the works of these men, the author derives this conclusion from his own original study of *The Honeycombe*, *The Dangerous Dead Faith*, and *The Assertion of grace*.

<sup>58</sup> Eaton, *Dangerous Dead Faith*, 54.

<sup>59</sup> Gamble, *Christ and the Law*, 59.

One sees it not only in the doctrinal ringleaders; it shows up in adherents too. Graebner notes that Eaton's works had an "inflammatory effect" on his hearers. Summarizing points of Eatonist contemporary Henry Burton, he says the adherents of Eatonism "...were no longer willing to accept instruction from any other clerical source, no matter how reputable... they openly scoffed at ministers they deemed to be in error, calling them... preachers of "dead faith" to their faces."<sup>60</sup> Since when are poisonous tongues and evasion of truth marks of piety? The doctrine has produced troublesome results not only in the ringleaders, but in the followers too.

Their sins of the tongue also manifest when they attempt to quote Reformers to their advantage, as their quotes are selective,<sup>61</sup> and often dishonest. Mark Jones answers the antinomian's love of Luther by reminding the reader that Luther himself coined the term "antinomian;" and Luther himself expounded upon, and prayed daily, the Ten Commandments.<sup>62</sup> In another example, Eaton argues the perfection of the works of Christians from Calvin's *Institutes* III.17.9, "that otherwise workes of the faithfull would be impure, uncleane, done by halfe, unworthy the sight of God; much lesse worthy of his love or delight."<sup>63</sup> He overlooks that two chapters later in *Institutes* III.19.5, that Calvin argues that God does not accept a believer's works because they are perfect, but overlooks faults like an earthly father overlooks the faults in

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<sup>60</sup> Graebner, "Protestants and Dissenters": 144, summarizing Henry Burton, *The Law and the Gospell Reconciled., or, The Euangelicall Fayth, and the Morall Law How They Stand Together in the State of Grace.* (London: F.N., 1631), 3. Title shortened for the sake of space.

<sup>61</sup> This observation was also made by a secondary source besides Jones quoted next, but it was not recorded at the time of research what that source was.

<sup>62</sup> Jones, *Antinomianism*, 4-5

<sup>63</sup> Towne, *Assertion*, 83-84.



their children's obedience.<sup>64</sup> Calvin even argues in *Institutes* IV.20.29 that tyrants are put over nations to chastise even the sins of believers.<sup>65</sup>

Still, in theory, shouldn't it work? The Puritans, as shown earlier, agreed on the supremacy of grace-based motives. Perhaps Eaton and Towne, and their followers, are bad apples in a good barrel? The next question is, did the Eatonists simply fail to live out their doctrine, or is unholiness the root *and* fruit of their system? This paper's contention is that Eatonist doctrine does not, and cannot, sanctify.

#### Eatonism neither Justifies nor Sanctifies

As argued earlier, Eatonism itself is built on a legalistic foundation: God does not punish believers because He does not see their sins, and their works are actually sinless; if these are not true, then God could not accept their persons. This is raw justification by works, to which adherent Galatians 5:2-4 (NKJV) says, "Christ will profit [him] nothing," that he is "debtor to keep the whole law," "estranged from Christ [who is] justified by the law," and is "fallen from grace." Christ neither justifies nor sanctifies such a man.

#### Back to the Dark Ages – The Obscurity of Scripture

Eatonism cannot produce holiness because it denies the perspicuity of Scripture. 1 John 2:21 (NKJV) says, "No lie is of the truth," and it is reasonable that any explanation or quotation of Scripture or men should be evidently sincere and honest, even if mistaken; yet Eatonism must

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<sup>64</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008). 551.

<sup>65</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 987.

explain away plain and clear passages such as 1 Corinthians 11:27-32, Hebrews 12:7-11, or Revelation 2:1-5 by twisted logic, evasion, and rude dismissals. Eaton and Towne do not brighten the truth in these passages—they darken them. Plain passages must be “evangelized” in order to fit the system, or contorted with an Origenist-style deeper meaning. Where will the knowledge of the Scripture go, if not back to the Dark Ages?

If Eaton and Towne are dishonest in doctrinal foundations, what will they do about Scripture’s flesh-withering demands of holiness? Are they capable of admitting to having the inflammatory, “earthly, sensual, demonic” (NKJV) tongue condemned in James 3:1-18? One need only spiritualize the text, and the text no longer condemns them; or eisegete another unsupportable sense into the text; or assert an unfounded exception for their case.

Antinomians have done the same in later church history. Charles Spurgeon in *Lectures to my Students* talks of a High Calvinist<sup>66</sup> expositor who wrangled Proverbs 21:1-2 into an exhortation for young converts not to cut their own spiritual throats by going to hear legal preachers; or William Huntington interpreting the seventh commandment as the Father telling the Son not to covet the devil’s wife—that is, the non-elect.<sup>67</sup> This was enough of a problem to merit attention in his ministerial lectures. It’s the old errors of Origen and Philo looking for a hidden spiritual meaning which neither grammar nor context would support.

Eatonists cannot claim superior holiness because it impossible for a true Eatonist to know what true holiness is. They are loose and dishonest in their quotations, and assert meanings the text cannot support. Eatonism asserts that Christ the Prophet, like Moses, cannot speak clearly.

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<sup>66</sup> Some classes of High Calvinism do encroach upon hyper-Calvinism, which is a form of antinomianism.

<sup>67</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1954). 98, 102. Secondary sources not given by Spurgeon for the references. Much ink has been spilt on whether William Huntington is an antinomian. The quote speaks for itself.

## Antinomianism Today

No Reformed Christian is going to openly welcome something they call anti-law. The backdoor for antinomianism—as in Eaton’s day—is an almost-right and unsuspecting doctrine of grace.

Antinomians present their ideas in dazzling fashion. For example, Tullian Tchividjian speaks of the “radical, untamable, outrageous nature of the gospel;”<sup>68</sup> or, after speaking of the transformation of the Gospel in his own life in the introduction of *Jesus + Nothing = Everything*, Tchividjian says, “I’m beginning to realize that the gospel is way more radical, offensive, liberating, shocking, and counterintuitive than any of us realize... the gospel is good but not safe.”<sup>69</sup> What true believer cannot identify with the spirit of these comments? However, this same man taught, contrary to 1 John 5:3, “Though the commands are indeed burdensome, that burden has been laid on the shoulders of another.” Danny Hyde of Reformation 21, in response, reminds the reader that “the newborn child of God’s has a newfound joy in sanctification.”<sup>70</sup> Antinomianism verbally exalts Christ and justification, but always dims sanctification.

Some today distort the nature of sanctification, like Eaton did. While Eaton effectively argues Christian sinlessness, some today teach a kind of Christian total depravity. Elyse Fitzpatrick in her book *Give them Grace: Dazzling your Kids with the Love of Jesus* (of which Tchividjian wrote the original foreword) says about the two greatest commandments, “Of course, the problem is that we never obey these simple commands.” Further, “The law does show us the

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<sup>68</sup> Elyse M. Fitzpatrick and Jessica Thompson, *Give Them Grace: Dazzling Your Kids with the Love of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 13.

<sup>69</sup> Tullian Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing = Everything* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 11.

<sup>70</sup> Hyde, Danny, “His Commandments are not Burdensome,” Reformation 21, July 18, 2016, <https://www.reformation21.org/blog/his-commandments-are-not-burdensome>. Accessed February 14, 2022. Citation applied to Tchividjian quote onward. Original links to Tchividjian blog in article are no longer accessible.

right way to live, but none of us obeys it. Not for one millisecond.”<sup>71</sup> It is true that the believer never fully obeys The Greatest Commandment, but this commandment is at the root of all holiness. In substance, the Christian truly loves God, and so in some part obeys; in the required extent, the Christian falls short. If we obey in no extent at all, we are sanctified in no extent at all; yet WCF XIII.1 teaches that believers are sanctified “really and personally;” and in section 3 that there is a “regenerate part [that] doth overcome.”<sup>72</sup> The Christian really does perform good—but imperfect—acts; and is really and personally changed. Like Eatonism,<sup>73</sup> there is over-guarding of the Gospel by distorting sanctification. Such statements imply—even if unintended—that there is no real sanctification.

At other times, an “evangelizing” of a commandment takes place. For example, Fitzpatrick interprets “of the Lord” in Ephesians 6:4 as “nurturing, correcting, and training them *in the truth of or about Jesus Christ*... warn[ing] or rebuk[ing] them when they forget to live in the light of what Jesus had already done.”<sup>74</sup> It’s a good principle, but it’s only a half picture. Matthew Poole provides a fuller sense, asserting that nurture and admonition refer to correction and instruction regarding duty as well as evangelism, and says “of the Lord” means, “and so it is either that admonition which is commanded by him, or whereby they are brought to be with him.”<sup>75</sup> Parents both evangelize and command the child. Fitzpatrick’s exegesis of Ephesians 6:4 is a specimen of the author’s overall tone as though rules, guidelines, and direct moral instruction

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<sup>71</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Give them Grace*, 35.

<sup>72</sup> Young, *Westminster*, XIII.1 and 3

<sup>73</sup> Although the author thinks Fitzpatrick to be imbalanced, she is by no means in the ranks of heresy like Eaton, and her Gospel emphasis for parenting is to be appreciated.

<sup>74</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Give them Grace*, 85. Italics are original.

<sup>75</sup> Matthew Poole, “Matthew Poole Commentary - Ephesians 6,” 2022, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/poole/ephesians/6.htm>. Accessed April 25, 2022.

should be treated with heavy caution, while our Lord often gave direct and piercing imperatives without overlaying it with “gracious” qualifications.

### **Conclusion**

The attractiveness of antinomianism is not surprising, as it starts by talking about high and glorious themes: justification, free grace, God’s love, union with Christ, and more; and why shouldn’t a Gospel-saturated, Christ-centered believer expect glorious, near-instinctive triumphs? It’d feel more pleasant than killing sin in the seemingly-arduous way laid out in John Owen’s *Mortification of Sin*. Nevertheless, this path has been proposed and found wanting. It cannot deal with counteractive Biblical data except by conjecture and dismissal. Godly, pious men not only rejected these views, but codified their response in a national assembly, in a standard of doctrine which endures even to today. Let him who thinks he stands take heed, lest he falls.

Let the believer beware, “Did God really say...” is the life of antinomianism. Let him beware that even under high and glorious-sounding statements about Christ, that justification, and free grace, there may be poison—even legalism! Let all beware that the By-Way, which was easier on the feet, was the destruction of Mr. Vain-Confidence.<sup>76</sup> It may not be pleasing to speak of cutting off hands and gouging out eyes upon pain of damnation, but the most wise God thought it best. Whoever shrinks from such talk may spare his hand and eye, but he cuts off his own feet.

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<sup>76</sup> John Bunyan, *Pilgrim’s Progress* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1973). 138, 147.

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