Christ and the Law

Studies on the Westminster Assembly

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THE WESTMINSTER
ASSEMBLY PROJECT

Christ and the Law

ANTINOMIANISM AT THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

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For my parents

What had it been for a Jew to pray to God, if Christ had not been in that prayer? To love God, if Christ had not been in that love?

—Anthony Burgess

I am no Arminian. I admire and magnifie the Free-Grace of God to his elect more than I am able to expresse.… I will seale with my bloud, by the Grace of my God, both against Arminians on the one side, and Antinomists on the other side. The one preferring the Free-will of man before the Free-Grace of God. The other prostituting the Free-Grace of God to all those grosse and gracelesse sinnes, that will not humble themselves, even as they are sinners, without any exception.

—Stephen Gerree

Jesus Christ is yesterday, to day, and the same for ever. And whatsoever saving grace is now given from Christ by the Spirit, was alwayes and in all times given unto all, that ever were saved by Christ; nor is there herein any difference between those times and these.

—Thomas Gataker

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Foreword

If, as Marx famously stated, communism was the specter that haunted Europe in the nineteenth century, then for Protestantism that specter is antinomianism. Almost from the moment Martin Luther articulated his understanding of salvation, the pungent criticism from Roman Catholics has been that justification by faith leads to moral license, for why would someone justified by the righteousness of another bother to act in anything approaching a moral manner? Christian freedom from the curse of the law looks to such critics like too much freedom from any obligation to the law.

Yet the status of the believer's obligation to the moral law was not simply a point of contention between Reformation Protestants and Tridentine Catholics. It was also a point of contention within Protestantism itself. No less a light than Luther felt obliged to clarify his teaching on the matter in the late 1520s when it became clear that, yes, in many places the newly clarified gospel of Jesus Christ was being used as an excuse for terrible moral laxity. And then, in the seventeenth century, English Reformed Protestantism was subject to intense internal pressure on precisely this issue as various factions and personalities vied to be the normative voice of Protestantism.

One important manifestation of this was the long-running debate that took place between two giants of English Puritanism and later nonconformity, Richard Baxter and John Owen. Baxter, traumatized by the sectarian chaos he witnessed in the Civil War, saw in the sophisticated theology of Owen the polite rationalization of the immorality he feared would become rampant if not checked by a more robust emphasis on the law and good works in the Christian life. This was the debate that first fascinated Dr. Gamble and motivated her initial doctoral studies.

Yet as with all historical projects, she soon realized that the Baxter-Owen debate did not arise out of a vacuum but needed to be understood against a broader canvas, most specifically the relevant debates at the Westminster Assembly, where the tensions of this issue that existed within English Protestantism were on full display. And so the project that provided the basis for the current book was born.

Drawing on Chad Van Dixhoorn's foundational research into the proceedings of the assembly, Dr. Gamble presents a picture of English Protestantism that is engaged in a struggle for the confessional identity of the church on the matter of good works and facing challenges from both radical Calvinists and Arminians. She also demonstrates that the specific question of the role of the law cannot be isolated from much broader theological themes, particularly the work of Christ and its application to the believer.

It is in this context that Dr. Gamble makes her most signal contribution. The debate at the assembly concerning imputation is a critical moment. Is it the whole obedience of Christ, active and passive, that is imputed, or just the passive? In delineating the many facets of this discussion and by treating it as part of longer ongoing discussions and conflicts within the English religious scene, Dr. Gamble both helpfully clarifies the points at issue and helps the reader understand why English Protestantism took the confessional shape that it did.

Questions about the role of the law in the Christian life are unlikely to disappear from Protestant discussions for as long as the church maintains an appropriate and robust emphasis on justification by grace through faith. Given that, Dr. Gamble's book is an excellent contribution to helping us understand why.

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February 2018

SERIES PREFACE

Studies on the Westminster Assembly

The Westminster Assembly (1643–1653) met at a watershed moment in British history, at a time that left its mark on the English state, the puritan movement, and the churches of England, Scotland, and Ireland. The Assembly also proved to be a powerful force in the methodization and articulation of Reformed theology. Certainly the writings of the gathering created and popularized doctrinal distinctions and definitions that—to an astonishing degree and with surprising rapidity—entered the consciousness and vocabulary of mainstream Protestantism.

The primary aim of this series is to produce accessible scholarly monographs on the Westminster Assembly, its members, and the ideas that the Assembly promoted. Some years ago, Richard Muller challenged post-Reformation historians to focus on identifying "the major figures and… the major issues in debate—and then sufficiently [raise] the profile of the figures or issues in order to bring about an alteration of the broader surveys of the era." This is precisely the remit of these Studies on the Westminster Assembly, and students of post-Reformation history in particular will be treated to a corpus of material on the Westminster Assembly that will enable comparative studies in church practice, creedal formulation, and doctrinal development among Protestants.

This series will also occasionally include editions of classic Assembly studies, works that have enjoyed a shaping influence in Assembly studies, are difficult to obtain at the present time, and pose questions that students of the Assembly need to answer. It is our hope that this series—in both its new and reprinted monographs—will both exemplify and encourage a newly invigorated field of study and create essential reference works for scholars in multiple disciplines.

John R. Bower
Chad Van Dixhoorn

Acknowledgments

It is a pleasure to thank the many people who have generously helped to bring this book into existence. The project began as a PhD thesis at New College, the University of Edinburgh, where my studies were funded by a studentship from the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences; I am grateful to the university for the support, which enabled me to spend three years in Edinburgh without financial worries. I arrived in Edinburgh eager to analyze the controversy surrounding Richard Baxter's accusation that John Owen was an antinomian because of Owen's theology of the person and work of Christ. In order to establish the context of the Owen/Baxter debate, I began research on what was intended to be one chapter on the Westminster Assembly's interaction with antinomianism. However, as I studied Chad Van Dixhoorn's 2004 Cambridge University PhD thesis, later published as *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly* (6 vols.; Oxford University Press, 2012), I quickly found that the assembly itself entertained significant debates over antinomianism that were barely covered in secondary scholarship. The debates were previously unknown because they were recorded in volumes of the assembly's minutes that had been lost for centuries, only now available as part of Van Dixhoorn's thesis. Realizing the significance of this gold mine of primary material, I proceeded to draft out a new PhD that would focus solely on the Westminster Assembly, leaving Owen for a still future project. This book is a heavily edited version of that thesis, which was completed in 2014; I hope it will be a useful resource for further studies on that venerable gathering of theologians, the Westminster Assembly.

The road a scholar treads can be lonely, requiring countless solitary hours at the library or a desk. Thankfully, I have had many companions to refresh and encourage me along the way. Initial expressions of gratitude must go to Susan Hardman Moore, my PhD adviser at New College. At once a caring mentor and a rigorous scholar, Susan was the embodiment of an ideal adviser. David Fergusson, my secondary adviser at New College, also provided gracious guidance.

Many thanks go to Chad Van Dixhoorn, John Bower, and Jay Collier at Reformation Heritage Books. From their initial suggestion of publishing my thesis, through their wise counsel on structure and content, this book is infinitely better because of their expertise. Any remaining inconsistencies or errors in the text are solely due to me. Librarians at the University of Edinburgh's New College and Main Libraries, the National Library of Scotland, the British Library, the Bodleian Library, and the Huntington Library in San Marino provided excellent service, patiently fielding my questions and material requests.

I am grateful for colleagues at New College, fellow participants of the Advanced Theological Studies Fellowship in Kampen, the Netherlands, as well as dear members of various Bible studies and churches I have been privileged to be a part of during the past years. Their faithful friendship has enabled me to persevere through long hours and days of research. My students at Providence Christian College, Pasadena, California, have kept me motivated to continue to pursue knowing and loving Christ.

Finally, my most loving thanks belong to my family. I could not have accomplished this project without their constant love, care, and encouragement. My parents were not only the first to teach me about the Westminster Assembly and its theology but, more importantly, the first to show me Christ. I dedicated this book to them as a small expression of my gratitude.

Abbreviations

BL	British Library, London
CJ	*Journals of the House of Commons*, British History Online https://www.british-history.ac.uk/search/series/commons-jrnl
"Lightfoot's Journal"	Lightfoot, John. "A Briefe Journal of Passages in the Assembly of Divines." Manuscript notes of John Lightfoot on the proceedings of the assembly (not in Lightfoot's *Works*). Transcription in C. B. Van Dixhoorn, "Reforming the Reformation: Theological Debate at the Westminster Assembly, 1643–1652" (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2004), vol. 2.
LJ	*Journals of the House of Lords*, British History Online https://www.british-history.ac.uk/search/series/lords-jrnl
MPWA	Van Dixhoorn, C. B., ed. *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643–1652* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), vols. 1–5.
ODNB	*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001–2004.
Van Dixhoorn, "Reforming"	Van Dixhoorn, Chad. "Reforming the Reformation: Theological Debate at the Westminster Assembly." 7 vols. PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2004.
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism

Introduction

Unlesse some speedy Course be taken therein by your wisdom and authority, they [antinomians] will soone draw millions of soules to cast off the whole morall law of God, and pervert the most fundamentall Doctrines of free grace, justification by faith in Christ and of sanctification, and to turn all into confusion, they having gained many well affected but ignorant people to imbrace their pernitious doctrines.

—The Westminster Assembly's August 10, 1643,
petition to Parliament

On August 10, 1643, the Long Parliament (1640–1660) received an urgent petition from its advisory assembly for religious matters, just a few weeks after the committee was formed. Parliament had tasked the committee, otherwise known as the Westminster Assembly, to bring biblical reformation to England. As the above quote from the assembly's petition shows, it called on Parliament to act quickly against antinomianism, one of the fastest-growing religious movements of the early seventeenth century. In the eyes of the assembly, if Parliament did not act to suppress antinomianism, the welfare of the city and nation was at stake—as already "many well affected but ignorant" people were turning to follow the sect.

What was antinomianism, and why was the assembly so concerned to alert Parliament of its growth? The label of antinomianism certainly was pejorative, and the assembly applied it with a broad brush, supplying Parliament with a list of culpable ministers in its petition. Antinomians can be described as those who deny in some way the ongoing relevance of some part or even the whole of the moral law. English antinomianism, however, was more complex and multifaceted than the simple denial of the continued use of and obligation to follow the moral law. The antinomianism of concern at the assembly was not a Münster-like lawlessness; instead, the Westminster Assembly and antinomian theologians wrestled over queries that were at the heart of the Continental Reformation and fought out

on English soil with dramatic debates and fiery pamphlet dialogues. The theologians attempted to answer persisting questions such as, What is the nature of redemption in the Old Testament? Do the Old and New Testaments present a unified or split picture of redemption? What is the basis for God's granting of justification: faith or Christ's righteousness imputed to sinners? What is the nature of faith and righteousness? Does justification produce faith, or does faith produce justification? Is exercising faith a necessary "condition" for the covenant of grace? Is there a remnant of sin in a believer after he or she has been justified? If so, how can a believer be truly justified *coram Deo* when sin corrupts the mind and heart? Is it possible for a believer to experience divine chastisement for his or her sin? Does God's law hold any condemning power over the life of the Christian? Should that law be used as a tool to bring believers to repentance? Are a believer's works performed after justification perfected in Christ, or do they remain sinful? And what grants a believer access to heaven—the imputation of righteousness, or adoption?

In the early decades of seventeenth-century England, these questions were debated in the context of the rise and, eventually, triumph of Arminianism.[1] In reaction against that triumph, antinomianism initially was an extreme anti-Arminian movement from within the Reformed camp.[2] However, by 1643, when the Westminster Assembly was given the task to bring reformation to England, the assembly singled out antinomianism, not Arminianism, as England's greatest theological threat.[3] The assembly was greatly alarmed by the way antinomian theologians answered the above

1. This study, following A. Milton, ed., *The British Delegation and the Synod of Dort (1618–1619)* (Suffolk, U.K.: Boydell Press, 2005), uses the term "Arminian" for those who held various forms of Remonstrant views.

2. P. Toon, *The Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2011). The book uses the term "Reformed" to describe anti-Arminians rather than "Calvinist" for the same reasons as R. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1, *Prolegomena to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 30.

3. D. Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil War England* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004); and T. Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), provide the most complete history of antinomianism's rise. The sole published work fully devoted to early English antinomianism prior to 2004 was G. Huehns, *Antinomianism in English History, with Special Reference to the Period 1640–1660* (London: Cresset Press, 1951). Unpublished sources on the early English antinomians is limited to one thesis: N. B. Graebner, "Protestants and Dissenters: An Examination of the Seventeenth-Century Eatonist and New England Antinomian Controversies in Reformation Perspective" (PhD diss., Duke University, 1984). M. Jones, *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest?* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2013) focuses on antinomianism's theology and combines later Dutch and Scottish antinomianism in his analysis. See W. G. Gamble, "Missing the Point?," review of *Antinomianism: Reformed*

questions and eventually determined that antinomian theologians fell outside the bounds of biblical orthodoxy.

The linchpin of disagreement between Arminians and antinomians, and what caused Reformed theologians to react against both, was whether justified sinners could receive divine chastisement for their sin. Connected to this was the question of whether a remnant of sin existed in the believer after he or she was justified—whether God's grace in justification was sufficient to change completely the heart of a sinner to that of an obedient servant.

Three differing positions on the nature of sin in the justified emerged as the three groups—Arminians, antinomians, and the Reformed—attempted to comprehend the biblical example of King David's participation in willful sin. Jacobus Arminius (1560–1609) and his followers could not fathom that believers could remain in sin post-justification. If one were truly justified, he would walk in holiness by the power of the Spirit: justification provided the freedom and ability to live a holy and godly life. If one willfully participated in sin, such as King David, or struggled with sin, such as the apostle Paul in Romans 7, it was clear either that he was not justified or that he had fallen from his justified state.

John Eaton, the "father" of English antinomianism, vehemently disagreed with the Arminian position that one could fall from his or her justified state. However, his understanding of the nature of justification did not allow for justified men and women to receive chastisement for their sin, because Christ received the full force of sin's punishment on the cross. Eaton argued that because of the efficacy of Christ's work of redemption, God could no longer see His people's sin or punish them for it. Eaton's God was not the complex mixture of mercy and justice normally conceived in Reformed divinity. When interacting with His justified children, Eaton's God could be neither judge nor legislator: He could not punish sin, because Christ's sacrifice had wholly and finally clothed His people in the "wedding garments of righteousness." God received believers into His favor freely only because the remembrance of their sins was buried from His sight. In response to the fact that King David received punishment for his sin, Eaton created a system of biblical redemption that consisted of three different "eras." The first era, from creation to the coming of John the Baptist, was governed by the law's strict rule. During this time, justification was gained only by perfect obedience to the law. Since David lived in this era, under the terror of the law, he received chastisement for his sin. John the Baptist ushered in the second era, ending with Christ's death, which brought the "glory of the third time," where justification was granted freely based on

Theology's Unwelcome Guest?, by M. Jones, *European Journal of Theology* 21, no. 2 (2014): 192–93, for an analysis of Jones's book.

the work of Christ. Believers in this time could not be held to keep the moral law, because it was a rule and a guide only for those under the terror of the first era. It was Eaton's structure of biblical redemption, specifically his view of the Old Testament, that earned him the "antinomian" title. Eaton created a system of redemption that excluded the Old Testament from God's grace and effectively silenced its role in the believer's life.

Reformed theologians diverged from both the Arminian and the antinomian position and argued that believers were still corrupted by sin despite their justification and thus would sometimes fall under divine chastisement. This chastisement served to humble the believer and call him or her to repentance. In addition to objecting to John Eaton's understanding of the remnant of sin in the believer, Reformed divines repudiated Eaton's hermeneutic and vociferously defended the unity of redemption as presented in the Old and New Testaments.

In the Westminster Assembly's understanding, antinomianism contorted the biblical presentation of redemption. It bifurcated the Old and New Testaments, conflated justification and sanctification, confused the nature of justifying faith, and denied punishment for sin. As a clerical assembly appointed by and answerable to Parliament and tasked with reforming the nation, the assembly was determined that something must be done to suppress the dangerous sect. The process of suppression was a complicated one. Anxiety over antinomian theology drove the Westminster divines into protracted soteriological debates, intense examination of antinomian ministers, and sharp discussions over whether antinomianism was heretical, which finally compelled them to shape the sections relating to soteriology in their 1646 Confession of Faith to function, in their minds at least, as the conclusive answer to antinomianism.

The assembly carried on its work of reformation for ten long years, working through King Charles I and the Archbishop William Laud's demise and officially finishing with the ascension of Oliver Cromwell to power in 1653. The decade from 1643 to 1653 was one of the most volatile and extraordinary in English history, and members of the assembly were involved in nearly every major political decision, let alone religious, made during that time.

Drawing on newly available primary material, this book is the first to trace the story of the interaction between antinomianism, the century's most influential and fastest-growing sectarian religious movement, and the Westminster Assembly, the seventeenth century's most important English religious assembly.[4] The extent and significance of this interaction has only

4. Studies that highlight aspects of the assembly's interaction with antinomianism are J. K. Jue, "The Active Obedience of Christ and the Theology of the Westminster Standards:

recently become apparent due to a large new pool of data related to the assembly. The divines left behind a sizable amount of evidence documenting their debates and proceedings, but much of it remained unavailable until 2004, when Chad Van Dixhoorn transcribed the minutes as part of his doctoral thesis.[5] The manuscript minutes were edited and published in their entirety in 2012.[6] The published version is now two-thirds larger than previous editions. Inquiries regarding whether the assembly's minutes could be transcribed were first entertained in June 1867, when a committee of the Church of Scotland formed to address the matter. The minutes were sent to the British Library and transcribed by Sir Edward Maunde Thompson. Then they were edited by Alexander Mitchell and John Struthers and published in Edinburgh.[7] The Blackwood edition was the only one available to scholars for 125 years; however, Thompson did not check his

A Historical Investigation," in *Justified in Christ: God's Plan for Us in Justification*, ed. K. S. Oliphint (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor Press, 2007), 109–16; C. Van Dixhoorn, "The Strange Silence of Prolocutor Twisse: Predestination and Politics in the Westminster Assembly's Debate over Justification," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 40 (2009), 402–7, 415; and A. D. Strange, "The Imputation of the Active Obedience of Christ at the Westminster Assembly," in *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism*, ed. M. A. G. Haykin and M. Jones (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 38–39. None of these studies presents a comprehensive investigation. For instance, the latest book to appear on the assembly's theology mentions that an antinomian controversy occurred before and during the time of the assembly, but makes only sparing use of new sources. See J. V. Fesko, *The Theology of the Westminster Standards: Historical Context and Theological Insights* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2014), 240–45. Much of the secondary research on the assembly focuses on its ecclesiastical debates. Monographs in this category include R. Carter, "The Presbyterian-Independent Controversy with Special Reference to Dr. Thomas Goodwin," 2 vols. (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1961); J. R. de Witt, *Jus Divinum: The Westminster Assembly and the Divine Right of Church Government* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1969); D. R. Ehalt, "The Development of Early Congregational Theory of the Church, with Special Reference to the Five 'Dissenting Brethren' at the Westminster Assembly" (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 1969); P. J. Smith, "The Debates on Church Government at the Westminster Assembly of Divines, 1643–1646" (PhD diss., Boston University, 1975); W. R. Spear, *Covenanted Uniformity in Religion: The Influence of the Scottish Commissioners upon the Ecclesiology of the Westminster Assembly* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012); and H. Powell, *The Crisis of British Protestantism: Church Power in the Puritan Revolution, 1638–1644* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015). A collection of essays that looks beyond ecclesiology can be found in J. L. Duncan III, ed., *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, 3 vols. (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2004, 2005); and W. van 't Spijker et al., *De Synode van Westminster: 1643–1649* (Houten: Den Hertog, 2002).

5. Van Dixhoorn, "Reforming."

6. The 2012 version still lacks sessions 1–44 and 120–54, which have not been found. The 550,000-word record spans the years 1643 to 1652 and contains the majority of the assembly's extant manuscript minutes and proceedings. The original minutes are housed in Dr. Williams's Library, London, as MS 38.1–3.

7. A. F. Mitchell and J. Struthers, eds., *The Minutes of the Westminster Assembly, 1644–49* (Edinburgh: Blackwood and Sons, 1874). See also *MPWA*, 1:66.

transcription, and he omitted, added, transposed, and misread words and lines. He also did not include the first two volumes of the minutes. In his 1977 doctoral dissertation, Robert Norris transcribed the first hundred folios of the assembly's minutes with commentary. However, his work misreads names and words and goes so far as to "misinterpret key aspects of the discussion."[8] It became clear that a critical edition of the minutes was needed to satisfy the academic community, and the late Professor David F. Wright took the responsibility to produce one.

The rediscovery of the first volume of assembly member John Lightfoot's (1602–1675) journal in the Cambridge University Library also changes the face of Westminster Assembly studies. Lightfoot took copious notes during the initial months of the meetings, and his journal now provides the sole record of the assembly's first forty-four sessions. Lightfoot's 27,000-word record of the opening months eluded the nineteenth-century editor who first published Lightfoot's journal in volume 13 of his works.[9] Even a cursory perusal of these sessions shows that antinomianism was the primary theological concern of the assembly from its first meeting, an important finding unknown to previous scholarship as the assembly's official minutes do not begin until August 4, nearly a month after its first session. Lightfoot recounts the moment assembly members became aware of antinomianism and details their immediate actions against it. He provides an account of the initial setup of the assembly's antinomian committee, which would become one of the assembly's most active, and the only description of the committee's examination of antinomian ministers comes from his journal. Lightfoot also supplies a record of the committee's response to antinomianism based on these examinations, which is not included in the assembly's minutes.

Lightfoot's journal reveals that the theological issues raised by antinomianism deeply impacted the assembly's debates on justification, the moral law, faith, works, and the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Those debates in turn led to revised versions of the Thirty-Nine Articles, which were then foundational for the assembly's Confession of Faith. As the assembly's Confession of Faith is arguably "the most important Reformed confession in the English-speaking world," this book, which shows the significance of antinomianism for the assembly, considerably furthers understanding of the formation, nature, and growth of

8. *MPWA*, 1:66. See R. M. Norris, "The Thirty-Nine Articles at the Westminster Assembly: An Edition with Introduction and Analysis of the Text of the Debates of the Westminster Assembly on the Revision of the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England" (PhD diss., University of St. Andrews, 1977).

9. John Lightfoot, *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot, D.D.*, ed. J. R. Pitman (London: J. F. Dove, 1824).

Reformed theology.[10] It sketches the complex theological landscape of the early decades of the 1600s, from the rise of antinomianism in the context of Arminianism to the assembly's first encounter with antinomianism in 1643. It summarizes the main theological tenets of antinomianism and examines the assembly's work against it both politically and theologically. The book concludes with an analysis of how the assembly's published documents answered antinomian theology.

10. David Fergusson, inside cover of Fesko, *Theology of the Westminster Standards*.