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Seventeenth Century Mudslinging:  
The Debate Over Free Grace and the Sermons of Dr. Tobias Crisp

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the  
Department of History in Candidacy for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts in History

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Asheville, North Carolina  
April 23, 2010

Amidst the bloodshed and chaos that gripped the emerging modern nation of England in the middle of the seventeenth century, a female servant was charged by her mistress for stealing linens. When the young girl realized she had been caught, she replied, “It was not I, but sin that dwelleth in me.”<sup>1</sup> Like the small child who tries to shift the blame for wrongdoing to a sibling, this girl attempted to escape punishment for her transgression by saying that it was not her fault, but rather the fault of the power of sin that was literally dwelling inside of her body and soul. This was not just a ploy that she feebly tried to use to appease her mistress. In fact, it held substantive weight in seventeenth century England as part of a series of beliefs known as antinomianism. Followers of this doctrine believed the laws in the Bible, particularly the Mosaic Law, was not applicable to converted Christians. Several famous men and women subscribed to antinomianism, perhaps the most famous being Anne Hutchinson, co-founder of the colony of Rhode Island in North America. However, thousands of miles across the ocean from Anne Hutchinson, “antinomian” was a derogatory term that was used out of a sense of anxiety over the course of the English Revolution. One prominent London preacher that had these accusations hurled at him was Tobias Crisp. His sermons were published posthumously in 1643, and again in 1690, and both editions stirred a debate that was driven by the uncertainty of the time period. Although Tobias Crisp was not by strict definition an Antinomian, the message he propagated did present a threat to Englishmen who were consumed by fear in the unstable environment of the 1640s, and again in the tumultuous years following the Glorious Revolution.

Historians have debated and thoroughly researched the tumultuous period in England during the mid-seventeenth century, from the civil wars to the Glorious Revolution. During the last half century, two main schools of historical thought have dominated the debate. The first is the

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<sup>1</sup>John Trapp, *Commentary on the New Testament* (Evansville, Indiana, 1958), 501, quoted in Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), 151.

Marxist school which considers economic factors and class conflict to be the main catalyst for the English Revolution. Prominent historians such as Christopher Hill belong to this category, and his books are some of the most consulted works by scholars studying the period, particularly the radical movements and ideas. His most famous, and arguably most cited, book on this subject is *The World Turned Upside Down* in which he studies the lower classes, but still arrives at essentially an economic cause of the events. Hill focuses on “the attempts of various common people to impose their own solutions to the problems of their time, in opposition to the wishes of their betters who had called them into political action.”<sup>2</sup> In looking at the actions of the common people as a reaction to the upper classes’ political turmoil, Hill takes the Marxist stance that the changes during this time period can be explained through a study of the conflicts that happened between classes.

Scholars who adhere to the second school of thought are labeled as Revisionists. Historians such as G.E. Aylmer suggest that the events during this period were part of a larger religious and social upheaval, and that the economic and social aspects of the period that so many historians find fascinating were only decisive in negative ways. He argues that they were actually counter-productive to the development of these radical events.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, historian S.L. Bethel believes that the events of the mid-seventeenth century were a result of religious upheaval. In his book, *The Cultural Revolution of the Seventeenth Century*, he considers the events of this time period to have been a direct result of the rise of Latitudinarianism and Deism, suggesting that there was “a split between thought and feeling” that led to a more rational age of reason.<sup>4</sup> Another Revisionist,

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), 11.

<sup>3</sup> G.E. Aylmer, *Rebellion or Revolution?: England 1644-1660* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1.

<sup>4</sup> S.L. Bethell, *The Cultural Revolution of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Dennis Dobson, Ltd., 1951), 11.

Conrad Russell, views the historical process not as a clash of opposites, but as a political narrative in which radical sects were merely puppets of the political forces at work.<sup>5</sup>

The political narrative continued with the scholarly work done in another era of British history: the Glorious Revolution. This time period has been considered by some historians to be the turning point in British history that was an almost instantaneous fix to the problems it had faced in the past century. Historian Tony Claydon describes the efforts of King William III to accomplish this “band-aid” effect in his work *William III and the Godly Revolution*.<sup>6</sup> However, other historians have seen this period as just another marker in the series of conflicts that eventually ushered England into the modern age. For example, historian J.R. Jones comprised a collection of essays in a book titled, *Liberty Secured?: Britain Before and After 1688*, which discuss the specific events, such as the passing of the Toleration Act that created sufficient turmoil to propel England toward modernity.<sup>7</sup>

One of these specific problems, both in the Civil Wars and the Glorious Revolution, was the debate over antinomianism and Tobias Crisp. In modern historiography, there several works were written in an attempt to define antinomianism in seventeenth century England and explain why it existed. Theodore Dwight Bozeman claims in his book *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638*, that harsh Puritan laws both in church and in everyday political society created antinomian sentiments among the English commoners.<sup>8</sup> Likewise in his book, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England*, historian David R. Como argues that there was ideological conflict in religion and politics that led to the Antinomian movement, which he

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<sup>5</sup> Conrad Russell, *Unrevolutionary England, 1603-1642* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1990), xi.

<sup>6</sup> Tony Claydon, *William III and the Godly Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), passim.

<sup>7</sup> J.R. Jones, ed., *Liberty Secured: Britain Before and After 1688* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), passim.

<sup>8</sup> Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 7.

defines as a movement that argued that the “Mosaic Law, including the Decalogue, was in some sense abolished, abrogated, or superseded for Christians.”<sup>9</sup>

In terms of the antinomian controversy, Tobias Crisp is an elusive figure. His biography was first written and published by John Gill in 1755, with that year’s edition of Crisp’s sermons. Gill defends his subject against the charge of antinomianism, stating, “that he went into real Antinomianism, must be denied.”<sup>10</sup> Scholars such as Hill and Como mention him briefly in their discussions of antinomianism, and usually write him off as an antinomian, pulling antinomian phrases from his sermons out of context in order to support their arguments. For example, Hill blatantly writes, “Tobias Crisp preached full-fledged antinomianism before 1640.”<sup>11</sup> However, the Australian independent scholar, David Parnham, has looked a little more closely at Crisp in recent years. Although he labels Crisp as having antinomian tendencies, he does not fully subscribe to the existence of a true antinomian doctrine, stating, “the ‘antinomian doctrine’ was in fact a cluster of doctrines concerning predestination and the economy of salvation.”<sup>12</sup> Instead, he wrote of Crisp as “an intelligent individual” who responded “to the practical divinity of the day.”<sup>13</sup>

However, one must not only consider the definition of antinomianism historically, but in order to fully understand Crisp’s theological beliefs, one must consider the definition of antinomianism during the time period in which Crisp lived and preached. According to historian Gertrude Huehns, the term was coined by Martin Luther, and can be defined as “one who

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<sup>9</sup> David R. Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 34.

<sup>10</sup> John Gill, "Memoirs of the Life, etc. of Tobias Crisp, D.D" in *Christ alone exalted being the compleat works of Tobias Crisp, Containing fifty-two sermons, in two volumes. To which are now added, notes explanatory of several passages in them, with some Memoirs By John Gill, D.D*, Volume 1 (London: printed for and sold by G. Keith, 1755, viii.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Hill, *Liberty Against the Law: Some Seventeenth Century Controversies* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1996), 214.

<sup>12</sup> David Parnham, "The Humbling of 'High Presumption': Tobias Crisp Dismantles the Puritan *Ordo Salutis*," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (January 2005), 50.

<sup>13</sup> Parnham, "The Humbling of 'High Presumption,'" 51.

maintains that the moral law is not binding upon Christians under the law of grace.”<sup>14</sup> This term labeled one side of the debate that had begun in the early years of the seventeenth century over a broad range of theological issues, including justification by faith, the validity of infant baptism, predestination, and the legitimacy of the government of the Church of England.<sup>15</sup> These debates were a reaction to the authoritarianism of a patriarchal Calvinist society.<sup>16</sup> Men and women from nearly every social stratum struggled with the strict piety of the two mainstream religious groups of the time, Puritans and Laudians, and broke off to form antinomian congregations.<sup>17</sup> Amidst heated religious and political debate, many were drawn to these congregations, for they offered hope of a much more attractive religious philosophy of personal piety than the unforgiving nature of both Puritanism and Laudianism. This new doctrine gained enough followers to become a threat to the existing religious orders because of the intense debate over religious and political issues raging during the decades leading to the English Civil Wars. .

When Dr. Crisp began preaching in the 1620s, as rector of Brinkworth, the theological debates between Puritanism and Laudianism began to spill into the political debates of the time, with Puritans on the side of Parliament, and Laudians on the side of the King.<sup>18</sup> During these debates, Charles I created strict religious policies at an inopportune time: after a severe famine and one of the worst plague outbreaks since the Black Death, people needed the comfort of religion.<sup>19</sup> However, the king’s position on religious matters stemmed largely from Archbishop Laud and was drastically strict, favoring rules such as only one sermon a week delivered by purely orthodox

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<sup>14</sup> Huehns, 11.

<sup>15</sup> Como, 22.

<sup>16</sup> Hirst, 260.

<sup>17</sup> Bozeman, 185.

<sup>18</sup> A.L. Morton, *The World of the Ranters: Religious Radicalism in the English Revolution* (London: The Camelot Press, Ltd., 1970), 10.

<sup>19</sup> Derek Hirst, *England in Conflict, 1603-1660: Kingdom, Community, Commonwealth* (London: Arnold, 1999), 113.

ministers.<sup>20</sup> Laud's policies focused much too greatly on shifting the focus of English religion from a sermon-based and personal style of worship to a more sacramental and ritualized style which was difficult for many to connect with.<sup>21</sup> Essentially, he tried to force unity on a country that, by the 1630s, had become anything but uniform.<sup>22</sup> Worse than this, the uniform policy he tried to force on the entire English population reeked of Arminianism, the religious doctrine that both Puritans, Evangelists, Antinomians, and most other Protestant groups could all agree to disdain. Naturally, Laud and his followers were dubbed "spawn of the Papists" by those who abhorred these new policies.<sup>23</sup> In addition, Laud's policies failed to meet with unified cooperation, as the king had hoped, and instead aggravated the issue by arousing suspicion that Charles I was subverting the Protestant faith and supporting Catholicism. Differences between Puritan and Laudian policies over the amount of emphasis to be given to the individual and his actions pressured Englishmen, from members of Parliament to the people of countryside towns, to seek religious theories "which promised a truer interpretation of the facts and experiences of their daily life."<sup>24</sup>

However, the new religious theories that people were seeking, especially antinomianism, were not widely accepted, and met with intense debate. The Civil Wars brought a feeling among Englishmen that a new age was upon them, and this gave them the opportunity to free themselves from old bondages.<sup>25</sup> Also, the collapse of church courts and any semblance of censorship allowed for the free discussion of once heretical doctrines such as antinomianism.<sup>26</sup> This debate quickly grew into heated controversy, and "antinomian" quickly came to be a derogatory term that accused

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<sup>20</sup> Hirst, 135.

<sup>21</sup> Como, 75.

<sup>22</sup> Huehns, 56.

<sup>23</sup> Maurice Ashley, *England in the Seventeenth Century (1603-1714)* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1962), 57.

<sup>24</sup> Gertrude Huehns, *Antinomianism in English History: with Special Reference to the Period 1640-1660* (London: The Cresset Press, 1951), 58.

<sup>25</sup> Morton, 79.

<sup>26</sup> Hill, *Liberty Against the Law*, 217.

a person of “horrible blasphemy” and promoting blatant sinfulness without regard for consequence.<sup>27</sup> According to Christopher Hill, the term became synonymous with “philosophical anarchism,” meaning, “freedom from law and convention as well as from priestly control.”<sup>28</sup> During the 1640s, the fears of many who accused men and women of antinomianism came to fruition with radical sects such as the Ranters, who took antinomianism to its extreme and asserted that sin existed only in one’s imagination.<sup>29</sup> Many antinomian extremists arose, such as the servant girl who was caught stealing, that used God’s Grace as an excuse to sin. Puritans and Laudians alike began to fear these extremists, and worry that in such a politically unstable atmosphere, the antinomian philosophy would be taken to the extreme of anarchy.

This fear of lawlessness stemmed from the increasing instability of the 1640s. When Charles I was forced by the failed war with Scotland to call Parliament, the religious and political issues of English society that had been simmering were finally brought to a boil, and their irreconcilability eventually exploded into Civil War. Debate over money, war policy, and policies over religion created two clear sides between king and Parliament, and eventually a breakdown of negotiations between the two led to war in 1642. The beginning of the war was nearly a total disaster for Parliament, and the King’s forces recovered much of the country while Crisp was preaching the sermons that would become so controversial.<sup>30</sup>

Dr. Tobias Crisp first preached in Brinkworth in Wiltshire, beginning in 1627, and remained there until the start of the Civil Wars. As a rector in this small town, he preached the gospel of “free grace,” the belief that man did not have to do anything to earn his salvation other

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<sup>27</sup> Thomas Bakewell, *The Antinomians Christ confounded and the Lords Christ exalted in which is contained a briefe confutation of Dr. Crispe and Mr. Lancaster : also a combat with the Antinonians Christ in his den, his arraignment, and the fainting soule built upon the true rocke, against which the gates of hell shall not prevaile* (London: Printed for Thomas Bankes, 1644), 5.

<sup>28</sup> Hill, *Liberty Against the Law*, 220.

<sup>29</sup> Hirst, 260.

<sup>30</sup> Aylmer, 53.

than simply believe in Christ. He was also known for his hospitality and evangelism, and according to Mr. Gill was much admired as a minister.<sup>31</sup> However, he found himself in trouble over allegations of simony, the crime of buying or selling ecclesiastical preferment, and stood a High Commission trial in 1634, in which he was eventually acquitted.<sup>32</sup> After mounting pressure from the “insolence of the cavalier soldiers,” Crisp relocated to London in 1642, where he had family connections and had occasionally preached before. It was here that Crisp preached the majority of the sermons that would eventually be published.

In his sermons, Crisp communicated ideas that were relatively new and controversial in European Christianity, but they were certainly not ideas that deserved the title of “antinomian.” Crisp taught that free grace was a way from the state of sin to a state of forgiveness and access to eternal life through Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup> Most importantly, God gave the gift of grace freely, and did not require any act on the part of the sinner, so that it was “children’s play” to accept this free gift.<sup>34</sup> He also preached that God was the only giver of this gift through Christ. Thus, there was no other way to accept the gift of salvation because, according to Crisp, “Christ was so our way, that there is no coming to the father but by him.”<sup>35</sup> Crisp called the promise of this free gift and the acceptance of it by man without any action necessary on his part the “Covenant of Grace.” Despite the belief that this covenant provided man with the freedom to do as he pleased without fear of retribution, Crisp also spent a considerable amount of time preaching that having grace was no encouragement to sin. He even went so far as to claim that free grace not only did not encourage licentiousness, but was actually the greatest cause in the world for encouraging obedience and

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<sup>31</sup> Gill, vi.

<sup>32</sup> Como, 63.

<sup>33</sup> Crisp, “Sermon II” in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. I (1643), 39-40.

<sup>34</sup> Crisp, “Sermon XII” in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. I (1643), 284.

<sup>35</sup> Crisp, “Sermon I” in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. I (1643), 2.

forbearance of sin.<sup>36</sup> This claim against encouraging sin was the main point in Crisp's sermons that, although often overlooked by his critics, cleared him of antinomianism.

In addition, historian Dr. David R. Como lists several tenets that antinomians in seventeenth century England subscribed to that Dr. Crisp clearly did not preach or follow. The first of these was the total rejection of the Puritan disciplined mode of piety and Puritan hostility to perceived sins such as drunkenness that were based on the antinomians' belief in the abolition of the Mosaic Law for Christians.<sup>37</sup> However, Dr. Crisp claimed that the free grace he preached was "a doctrine that doth establish the Law, and not make it void."<sup>38</sup> He then went even further to beseech his followers to refrain from sin, and labeled as "monsters" those that "dare presume to make it their practice to be drunk, and to break the Sabbath, and to curse, and to swear, and to live in uncleanness."<sup>39</sup> Although Crisp preached fervently that the acceptance of free grace rendered the threat of eternal damnation for disobeying the Mosaic Law void, he also asserted that this did not render the Law itself void, for Christ still expected Christians to follow it. In fact, they should do so even more in order to glorify their Savior. Therefore, Crisp did not proclaim believers completely free from sin, which Como asserts is another one of the tenets of antinomianism.<sup>40</sup> In fact, Crisp even preached that believers would continue to sin after Christ converted them, and they should repent of the sins they committed so they would not fall victim to sin again.<sup>41</sup> Clearly, he did not preach any sort of libertine doctrine that would qualify him as an antinomian by Dr. Como's standards.

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<sup>36</sup> Crisp, "Sermon III" in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. III (1646), 111.

<sup>37</sup> Como, 34.

<sup>38</sup> Crisp, "Sermon III" in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. III (1646), 111.

<sup>39</sup> Crisp, "Sermon III" in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. III (1646), 114, 124.

<sup>40</sup> Como, 36.

<sup>41</sup> Crisp, "Sermon III" in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. III (1646), 122.

However, Dr. Crisp did adhere to one of the tenets of antinomianism in that he shared the propensity to offer believers a sense of assurance and joy.<sup>42</sup> His primary concern in preaching his sermons was to offer comfort to the masses in a time period that was filled with fear and uncertainty. He wished to counteract the hell-fire and brimstone preaching of the Puritan religious communities as well as the laborious doctrine of works of the Arminians.<sup>43</sup> In a reflection on his father's life, Samuel Crisp wrote almost fifty years later:

considering that as the time when these Sermons were Preached and first Printed, 1642, and 1643 was as sad a time as this Nation knew for many Years. When a violent storm of an outrageous Civil War did rage in the Bowels of the Kingdom. So that every day people look'd to be slain by the merciless Sword: Which called for consolatory Discourses for the People of God. Which God eminently assisted my Father to Preach, with great acceptance to thousands.<sup>44</sup>

Even after fifty years, Englishmen could look back and realize that the instability and uncertainty caused by the Civil Wars required a mode of comfort for the people caught in the middle of all of this. Dr. Crisp strove to meet this need and comfort his flock with messages of a loving God and freedom offered through God's grace.

In addition to the need for comfort, the decay of church courts during the civil wars made the issue of sin and its place in society a real concern for the common Englishman, and Crisp desired to address this concern.<sup>45</sup> He wrote that sin should not be considered a tyrannizing power and warned men not to believe that their peace depended on subduing the power of sin.<sup>46</sup> Crisp desired that men should feel free to live their lives as best they could; he did not give them

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<sup>42</sup> Como, 36.

<sup>43</sup> Hill, *Liberty Against the Law*, 214; Stoughton, Vol. II, 43.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen Crisp, "To the Christian Reader" in *Christ alone exalted being the compleat works of Tobias Crisp, D.D., containing XLII sermons ... which were formerly printed in three small volumes ... to which is now added ten sermons, whereof eight were never before printed faithfully transcribed from his own notes, which is all that will ever be printed of the said Doctor's* (London: Printed for William Marshal at the Bible in Newgate-Street, 1690), ii.

<sup>45</sup> Christopher Hill, *Some Intellectual Consequences of the English Revolution* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 70.

<sup>46</sup> Crisp, "Sermon I" in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. I (1643), 15-20.

permission to disobey the Law, but he encouraged them to live their lives without the constant pressure of following every strict religious ritual and guideline that men had created. He claimed that these men had no power to create rituals that everyone else was forced to follow, stating, “That which cannot set itself compleat and righteous before God, can never set another righteous before God.”<sup>47</sup> Crisp firmly believed that no one but Christ could set a man righteous before God, so these Puritan and Anglican priests certainly did not have the power to say what a man could and could not do in order to obtain this righteousness. Only an individual man could make himself happy by accepting the free grace of God; he did not need the approval of a minister who claimed to dictate the Law.

After teaching these beliefs in Brinkworth and in London, Tobias Crisp died of smallpox in 1643. In the same year, his friend and follower, Robert Lancaster, published several of his sermons over the next 3 years. Released in 3 volumes, the overall publication contained fifty-two of his sermons preached in and around London. According to his biographer, John Gill, Crisp never published the sermons himself because he believed that was not his calling from God, but it is unknown as to whether or not the sudden interest in publication by his friend was a deathbed wish. Most likely Lancaster’s decision to publish the sermons was based on the knowledge that by 1643, King and Parliament found themselves at a relative stalemate, and the tension that naturally arose among the English people created a need for the comfort that he felt Crisp’s sermons offered. Unfortunately, this tension also created a breeding ground for controversy, and the first publication suffered tremendous backlash, and London pamphleteers rashly accused it of antinomianism. However, upon close examination of his forty-two sermons, it is obvious that many of these accusations were gross exaggerations taken out of context, and his doctrine did not

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<sup>47</sup> Crisp, “Sermon VII” in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. III (1646), 223.

follow that of antinomianism after all. His doctrine focused primarily on the belief of free grace, which although a part of antinomianism, did not in itself make him an antinomian.

The appeal of Crisp's sermons to the lower classes in English society was one reason that their publication caused so much controversy, for this appeal worried English landowners. During the Civil Wars, the lower classes were given a chance for the first time in British history to voice their own opinions. Parliament now had the opportunity to be in charge of the government, rather than a removed monarch that rarely troubled himself over the needs of his lowliest subjects. In addition to this, the Civil Wars created a need for an armed militia that was comprised of more than just the nobility as feudalism had dictated in the past. Therefore, for the first time, the common Englishman was given leverage and a voice in the form of the New Model Army. It was these common Englishmen that Crisp's message of comfort, which compared afflictions to "flea-bitings" that should be rejoiced in, most appealed to.<sup>48</sup> In a time of national crisis and political and religious chaos, Crisp's sermons taught that "the sins of the times that are committed by the wicked, they cannot do God's people any hurt."<sup>49</sup> They offered a message of comfort that let people know that although the times may be troubling because of the conflict currently in progress between Puritans and the King, God promised to protect those who were victims of this conflict.

These sermons also relayed a message of empowerment to the people of England who struggled to make ends meet, implying that "the wicked" who were currently causing all of the nation's problems would have their endeavors come to a failing halt, while anyone who stood by God and his message of grace would "prosper in every thing you take in hand."<sup>50</sup> This message of universal free grace that promised to protect and comfort those in need was a direct reaction to the staunch predestination of Puritanism. Crisp wanted those who felt religiously lost and confused

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<sup>48</sup> Crisp, "Sermon XIII" in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. II (1644), 388.

<sup>49</sup> Crisp, "Sermon I" in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. III (1646), 23.

<sup>50</sup> Crisp, "Sermon VII" in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. I (1643), 167.

during the Civil Wars to understand that there was “not one soul under heaven, but if the Lord gives him to come, and receive this Grace,” so that he could experience the peace and comfort offered in Crisp’s messages as well.<sup>51</sup> This universal message of God’s constant grace quickly gained popularity among the masses who sought some sort of stability in a changing England. However, it also created an adverse reaction among the propertied Englishmen who felt their world changing and crumbling beneath them, and thus led to intense debate.

Before his death, Crisp anticipated that the publication of his sermons would stir up debate, and tried to quell this controversy by addressing it in his sermons. However, he admitted that the arguments he put forth to do this would probably make the dispute greater than it was before.<sup>52</sup> He was certainly accurate in this assumption. The men who challenged Crisp and published pamphlet after pamphlet attacking his theology and accusing him of antinomianism were certainly uneasy about the power of God being put into the hands of the common masses. One of the main arguments that arose time and time again against Tobias Crisp was that one should not be alleviated from religious duties merely for the sake of comfort. Stephen Geree, a Puritan pastor from Surrey, was one of the first to voice this concern, stating in his pamphlet against the publication of Crisp’s sermons, “afflictions are for sinne, because they are to preserve from sinne, even as we say a medicine is for the Plague, which preserves from the Plague.”<sup>53</sup> Contrary to what Crisp taught, his Puritan critics insisted that affliction was necessary in order to keep people in line, and that without the hardships of the lower classes, the masses could stir up disorder. This order was necessary to preserve the Puritan status of the elect, and another common argument brought against Crisp’s doctrine was that a man was not a Christian simply because he believed he

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<sup>51</sup> Crisp, “Sermon V” in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. II (1644), 165.

<sup>52</sup> Crisp, “Sermon XIV” in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. II (1644), 429.

<sup>53</sup> Stephen Geree, *The Doctrine of the Antinomians by Evidence of God’s Truth, plainly Confuted, In an answer to divers dangerous Doctrines, in the seven first Sermons of Dr. Crisp’s fourteen, which were first published* (London: Printed by R.C. for H. Blunden, at the Castle in Corn-hill, 1644), 14.

was.<sup>54</sup> Puritans needed the doctrine of the elect in order to maintain their status in society while inflicting order in the religious community that they struggled against the Laudians to control.

Robert Lancaster responded to this by asserting that the Puritans were only afraid of God's judgment upon themselves if the masses were ever to be released from their religious restraints.<sup>55</sup> Even before the publication of his sermons and the ensuing debate, Crisp had his own answer to this fear of what the masses were capable of. He asserted that the masses would be under control if they were simply willing to adhere to the proper usage of free grace, and those that were truly believers would not abuse it by sinning freely.<sup>56</sup> Those that were not true believers and did not adhere to this should not discourage the spread of the doctrine of free grace, he claimed, asking, "shall the children want their bread, because Dogs catch at it?"<sup>57</sup> In addition, Crisp claimed that this fear of sin that the Puritans advocated actually worked against them, recalling in one of his sermons the "sufficient experience not long since, of the evill and mischief this fear had like to have occasioned in the Army."<sup>58</sup> Since the exact date of Crisp's deliverance of these sermons is unknown, it is impossible to accurately pinpoint which incident he is referring to. However, there was considerable backlash in the New Model Army to mainstream Puritanism, and after the Civil Wars, many members of the Army joined the ranks of the radical sects that appeared throughout England, such as the Diggers that threatened the right of personal property. The 1640s were a time when radical sects demanded new freedoms and more equality for the masses, and Crisp's doctrines were encouraged these masses to reject religious conventions that had kept people in line for well over a century. Conservatives worried that any radical or licentious doctrine would be

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<sup>54</sup> Geree, 127.

<sup>55</sup> Robert Lancaster, Preface to *Christ alone exalted in fourteen sermons preached in and neere London, Volume I* (London: 1644), A3.

<sup>56</sup> Crisp, "Sermon III" in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. III (1646), 110.

<sup>57</sup> Crisp, "Sermon III" in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. III (1646), 127.

<sup>58</sup> Crisp, "Sermon I" in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. III (1646), 49.

dangerous in the hand of the lower classes of a revolutionary atmosphere.<sup>59</sup> Despite Crisp's prior objections, the fear of the masses drove his opponents to make harsh and generally unfounded accusations.

Dr. Crisp's opponents slandered him with the title of antinomian in an effort to discourage the growing popularity of Crisp's publications. He recognized that there would be slanders against him, and warned his followers that "in matters of Religion, at this day, there is nothing so vilely calumniated, as the publishing of this free Grace of God to men."<sup>60</sup> In fact, at times, it appears that the majority of his opponents' published arguments centered around these slanderous accusations. For example, in a pamphlet written to challenge the first volume of *Christ Alone Exalted*, Thomas Bakewell accused Crisp and his colleagues of being "like common whores, who seek to escape away and to leave their bastards upon the parish."<sup>61</sup> One of his main arguments to support this insult was a passage taken from Crisp's sermons out of context. According to Bakewell, this passage was "cursed blasphemy" because it advocated a refusal to submit to the law. He argued that this passage claimed that anyone who submitted to the law would be going against God's righteousness.<sup>62</sup> However, a look at this passage in the context of Crisp's sermons reveals that he said this only as an example of the "foul blurre of Antinomianism," of which he claimed he was not a part.<sup>63</sup> Several instances such as this occur in the pamphlets written by Crisp's opponents, in which Crisp's words were taken out of context in order to support accusations of antinomianism and insults such as perversion of the gospel and "brain-sick Divinity."<sup>64</sup> Crisp's opponents hoped that these accusations and insults would deter the attraction of Crisp's doctrine to the masses.

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<sup>59</sup> Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down*, 150.

<sup>60</sup> Crisp, "Sermon II" in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. III (1646), 105.

<sup>61</sup> Bakewell, i.

<sup>62</sup> Bakewell, 12.

<sup>63</sup> Crisp, "Sermon IX" in *Christ Alone Exalted*, Vol. I (1643), 206.

<sup>64</sup> Gere, 66, 103.

However, the debate was heated, and Crisp's advocates published similar derisory allegations in order to attract followers from the mainstream religion into their own religious community. They heatedly defended Crisp against any defamation, stating in every publication that he was a faithful "man of God" that strove to preach the truth to all men of the gospel of free grace and promote the obedience of sanctified spirits.<sup>65</sup> After this defense, Crisp's advocates hurled their own slanders at the Puritans who dared to publish against Dr. Crisp and brand him with antinomianism. One insult delivered by an unknown author of a poetic tribute to Dr. Crisp questioned his opponents' intentions, claiming that they "rather aime t' advance themselves then truth, to get a name, and so a living" and that the only reason they hurled these accusations of antinomianism upon Crisp was that "they perceive some of their audience drop away."<sup>66</sup> Lancaster took this further and not only questioned their motivations but also questioned the validity of their arguments, accusing Geree of making inferences without proof of some "slanderous coin" and charging Dr. Crisp with it. He then threw his own insults at Geree and likened him to the "Pharisees and boasters" that were often portrayed as the antagonists in the New Testament.<sup>67</sup> These accusations rivaled those of the Crisp's accusers, and illustrate just how desperate both sides of this argument were to draw the masses to their congregations.

This argument seemed as though it was escalating and had no end in sight. The unknown author of Crisp's memorial drove the point home when he made the threat to any opponents of the followers of Crisp that if they continued to hurl false accusations of antinomianism at these sermons, he would "denounce 'em mine and plaine truths foes: He that can bite in verse, can sting

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<sup>65</sup> *A memoriall to preserve vnsported to posterity the name and memory of Doctor Crispe* (London: for John Sweating, 1643), 1; Lancaster, *Preface*, A2; Robert Lancaster, *Vindiciæ Evangelii, or, A vindication of the Gospel, with the establishment of the law being a reply to Mr. Steven Gerees treatise entituled, The doctrine of the Antinomians confuted: wherein he pretends to charge divers dangerous doctrines on Dr. Crisp's sermons, as anti-evangelical and antinomical* (London: Printed for a friend of the authors, and sold by Will. Marshall, 1694), 2. This pamphlet was originally written and published in 1643.

<sup>66</sup> *A memoriall*, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Lancaster, *Vindiciæ Evangelii*, 27.

in prose."<sup>68</sup> In other words, as long as his opponents slandered Crisp in their publications, this unknown author would continue to defend him. However, in 1643, the English Parliament entered into the Solemn League and Covenant with the Presbyterian Scots, an allegiance that guaranteed military aid to the English in return for promising religious reform, which to the Scots meant a firm theology of Presbyterianism. This discouraged any more public debate between Crisp and his Puritan opponents, since they both seemed to favor the side of Parliament in this conflict, and it was clear that Parliament could not win without Scottish aid. By 1646, the reaction against Crisp's sermons had all but died in print. This was cemented by the victory of Parliament and the emergence of the Protectorate after 1649, which placed the Puritan side of the controversy firmly in power, leaving little room for public antinomian sentiments.<sup>69</sup> By the time the Restoration reestablished the traditional hierarchical Anglican Church, it seemed that, at least in print, the antinomian controversy and Tobias Crisp had all but been forgotten in the British Isles.<sup>70</sup>

However, the debate over antinomianism and Dr. Crisp's sermons arose once again as it became apparent that the current line of restored kings threatened the religious (Protestant) stability that proponents had fought so hard for in the past century. The solution to the religious tensions that arose during this time was the Glorious Revolution, meant to be a fix-all "band-aid" for English society by appointing a staunch anti-Catholic, Protestant king. However, the passionate fear for the church's safety that had been the driving force before the Revolution was still present afterwards, and dissenters seemed to be thriving now that religious toleration was more afforded than it had been under the recent Restoration period kings.<sup>71</sup> This religious toleration stemmed from the passage of the Toleration Act in 1689, which permitted trinitarian

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<sup>68</sup> *A memoriall*, 1.

<sup>69</sup> Hirst, Chapter 9, *passim*.

<sup>70</sup> Gordon J. Schochet, "From Persecution to 'Toleration'" in *Liberty Secured: Britain Before and After 1688*, ed. J.R. Jones (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 123.

<sup>71</sup> Claydon, 188.

Protestant religious services outside Anglican buildings. However, it was uncertain just how much dissenting religious groups were admitted to full citizenship, and the hold clerics had over their congregations was broken, leading to a sharp decline in church attendance in the 1690s.<sup>72</sup> It was under this umbrella of religious uncertainty, similar to that of the 1640s, that antinomianism once again thrived in the 1690s.

Despite the peace and stability that the Glorious Revolution was intended to bring, the debate once again erupted with the republication of Crisp's sermons by his son. This edition was a comprehensive publication of the three volumes that had been published in the 1640s. The only difference between these two editions was that Stephen Crisp now added an additional 10 sermons that his father preached in the countryside prior to moving to London. He hoped that in adding these sermons that were delivered in a more conservative locale, he would be able to clear his father's name of any remaining slanders of antinomianism.<sup>73</sup> The passage of the Toleration Act in 1689 gave him his chance. He seized the opportunity to vindicate his father, and to once again propagate the comforting doctrine that his father had preached. Reminiscing on the necessity for comfort during the tumultuous era of his father's lifetime, Stephen Crisp wrote, "I say, as that was a time when these Discourses were of all times most necessary, Death hanging immediately over the heads of all: So now the inculcating this great point, is of as much, if not more use."<sup>74</sup> Amidst a seemingly new stable political and religious environment for all Protestants in England afforded by the Glorious Revolution, Stephen Crisp felt that the nation was still in enough of a crisis that it needed to hear his father's message of comfort. However, there was incredible backlash to this message once again.

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<sup>72</sup> Claydon, 84, 179.

<sup>73</sup> Stephen Crisp, "Note" in *Christ alone exalted being the compleat works of Tobias Crisp, D.D., containing XLII sermons ... which were formerly printed in three small volumes ... to which is now added ten sermons, whereof eight were never before printed faithfully transcribed from his own notes, which is all that will ever be printed of the said Doctor's* (London: Printed for William Marshal at the Bible in Newgate-Street, 1690), 74.

<sup>74</sup> Stephen Crisp, "To the Christian Reader," ii.

The renewed debate did not stem from the sudden discovery of antinomian doctrine in the ten additional sermons published in this 1690 edition. These ten sermons contained no remarkable differences from the other forty-two sermons that could be accused of being antinomian in nature. They promoted the same doctrine of free grace that their forty-two counterparts advocated. When he preached these over a half century earlier, Crisp still maintained that Christ was the only way to obtain free grace, that free grace did not encourage sin, and that the law was not void.<sup>75</sup> However, he spent a considerably greater amount of time focusing on these last two, emphasizing the need for obedience, and discussing the purpose of the law in detail. Reacting to the accusations that he was encouraging sin, Crisp defended himself and his doctrine with pleas to his congregation to “obey [Christ], because then we are warrantably employed.”<sup>76</sup> He went on to explain that obedience was necessary for the improvement of men and that it is inextricably linked to free grace. If one had free grace, one would naturally want to obey the Law.<sup>77</sup>

While preaching these ten sermons, Crisp also contemplated just what the Law and its purpose was in his congregation’s lives. He asserted that “it serves to revive Sin, to be a rule to avoid sin” and that “this is one use of the Law, to shew Man his Transgression.”<sup>78</sup> He wanted his congregation to understand that they needed the Law to show them that they needed salvation; if they didn’t have the Law, they would never know how lost they were. He went on to add, “we are under the Law still, or else we are Lawless.”<sup>79</sup> In no way was Tobias Crisp advocating the antinomian idea of lawlessness or abolition of the Law; in fact, he believed that the Law was actually necessary. Because of the time spent discussing obedience and the necessity of the Law in people’s lives, these ten extra sermons were clearly just as free of antinomianism as the previously

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<sup>75</sup> Tobias Crisp, “Sermon I” in *Christ Alone Exalted* (1690), 17, 35.

<sup>76</sup> Tobias Crisp, “Sermon I” in *Christ Alone Exalted* (1690), 35.

<sup>77</sup> Tobias Crisp, “Sermon II” in *Christ Alone Exalted* (1690), 35-64.

<sup>78</sup> Tobias Crisp, “Sermon IV” in *Christ Alone Exalted* (1690), 92.

<sup>79</sup> Tobias Crisp, “Sermon IV” in *Christ Alone Exalted* (1690), 93.

published forty-two that raised so much controversy. If anything, they rendered Crisp even less of an antinomian, as his son had hoped would be the case upon their publication.

However, the debate over his theology soon flared up again, with the publication of several pamphlets by both Anglican and Presbyterian authors denouncing Crisp as a dangerous antinomian. Once again, the fear of what the masses were capable of in a time of great political and religious change threatened members of the mainstream religion. In fact, the general apprehension and debate had grown even greater in response to the growth and organization of the followers of Crisp and the emergence of their doctrine in that of other Dissenters'.<sup>80</sup> Under William and Mary, any group of Dissenters, including Crisp's followers, could have their own churches with their own ordained ministers. This was a very real threat to their opponents because of the growing number the followers of free grace. One unnamed opponent of Crisp's pointed out the popularity of this "Book of Sermons" and warned against the danger of this multitude.<sup>81</sup> Another opponent commented on the prevalence of Crisp's influence, saying that he heard these arguments "in Coffee Houses and everywhere."<sup>82</sup> Stephen Crisp's response to these complaints was simply that if his father's opponents were afraid of losing their congregation to the doctrine of free grace, then they should change their doctrine to that of free grace.<sup>83</sup> Fearful of instability and

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<sup>80</sup> John Stoughton, *History of Religion in England, From the Opening of the Long Parliament to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, vol. 5, *The Church of the Revolution* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1881), 90; Gordon Rupp, *Religion in England, 1688-1791* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 464.

<sup>81</sup> *Crispianism unmask'd, or, A discovery of the several erroneous assertions and pernicious doctrins maintain'd in Dr. Crisp's sermons occasion'd by the reprinting of those discourses* (London: Printed for Richard Baldwin, 1693), 1.

<sup>82</sup> Samuel Young, *A New-Years-gift for the Antinomians particularly Mr. Malebranch Crisp, or, as he foolishly, and yet often (but truly stiles himself the unworthy branch of Dr. Crisp who hath wickedly attempted to underprop a rotten cause of his father, by notorious forgeries, concerning Mr. Baxter, Mr. How, and Dr. Bates, as justifiers of Dr. Crisp as an orthodox man, and no Antinomian: in a rhapsody, intituled, Christ exalted, and Dr. Crisp defended; against the reverend Mr. Alsop, with whom he rudely, and ignorantly plays under the name of his dear Kratiste* (London: printed for John Marshal, at the Bible in Grace-Church-street, near Cornhil, 1699), 11.

<sup>83</sup> Stephen Crisp, *Christ alone exalted in Dr. Crisp's sermons: partly confirmed in answering Mr. Daniel Williams's preface to his Gospel truth stated, by alledging testimonies from Scripture and the doctrine of the Church of England, in the Book of homilies establish'd by law and other orthodox authorities : shewing how he hath wronged as well the truth as the said doctor in the great point of justification by the Neonomian doctrine / humbly offer'd by S.C., an unworthy son of the said doctor, author of a book entituled, Christ made sin, reflected on by Mr. Williams* (London: Printed for William Marshall and Henry Barnard, 1693), 5.

unsure of what the new regime held for the religious sector of English life, mainstream religions once again felt threatened by the popularity of Crisp's sermons and the possible rise of antinomianism.

Presbyterians and Anglicans alike also felt threatened by the subtle saturation of Crisp's doctrine of free grace into other religious doctrines, creating a strain of mixed theology that incorporated the tenets found in Crisp's sermons. To Crisp's opponents, this acceptance, made possible by the growing idea of religious toleration in late seventeenth century England, was the most dangerous threat to their stability of all, stating, "it is as dangerous and pernicious a Piece as hath appear'd in Print in this Age; and it is the more so, because it is in other parts so good and excellent."<sup>84</sup> One Millenarian Dissenter agreed that Crisp's doctrine had both its flaws and its failures, but believed that it was beneficial to the spread of Protestantism for the followers of Crisp and their opponents to reconcile.<sup>85</sup> Crisp's defenders arbitrarily agreed, arguing that Crispian, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Puritans were all Protestant, and therefore the debate should not be amongst themselves, but between all Protestants and Catholics.<sup>86</sup> However, the major religious groups were not yet ready to forsake the opportunity to be the one Protestant sect in control of England, and concede to this meshing of theological ideas.

In order to combat this lax acceptance of Crisp's ideas, slanderous insults once again became the weapon of choice in this battle of print. Worried about the spread of sinfulness, Crisp's opponents fought this doctrine that "destroys all fear of God" with insults and accusations such as "poor giddy brains!" and "if ever there was an antinomian under heaven, we may conclude that he

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<sup>84</sup> *Crispianism unmask'd*, 1.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas Beverley, *A conciliatory discourse upon Dr. Crisp's sermons: on the observation of Mr. William's dissatisfactions in them: in which the unsearchable riches of Christ* (London: Printed for William Marshall, 1692), 9.

<sup>86</sup> Thomas Edwards, *A short review of some reflections made by a nameless author upon Dr. Crisp's sermons, in a piece entituled Crispianism unmask'd with some remarks upon the union in the late agreement in doctrin among the dissenting ministers in London : subscribed the 16th of December, 1692, and that as referring unto the present debates* (London: Printed for Will Marshall, 1693), A2.

was one.”<sup>87</sup> Not only did they try to convince their readers that Crisp had been an antinomian, but that he was the worst of the antinomians, and those that followed him were hopelessly out of their minds. They implored those that found this doctrine attractive to be wiser than their ancestors and reject Crisp’s teachings, thereby rekindling the fifty-year-old debate.<sup>88</sup> This debate from the 1640s, obviously still fresh in the readers’ minds, escalated even further with accusations of Crisp being a royalist, having compromised the teaching of the Gospel because of his royalist allegiances.<sup>89</sup> This allegation especially disturbed readers since they undoubtedly still remembered the bloodshed and instability of the Civil War years. With accusations and insults that poured salt on old wounds, Crisp’s opponents attempted to quell the danger of licentiousness in any manner possible and therefore secure the primacy of their religious doctrine within the evolving English political and religious atmosphere.

However, Crisp’s advocates believed that their doctrine was necessary to bring comfort to people in a time of uncertainty, and that there was a greater need for it in 1690 than ever before. Therefore, they felt the need to equally accuse their own accusers. Aside from rationally explaining that their opponents took Crisp’s sermons out of context while destroying his reputation without any sort of proof, the defenders of this doctrine also dealt their own array of insults and seventeenth century religious gossip for their readers. One such defender, Thomas Edwards, accused any who opposed Crisp’s doctrines of Arminianism, a label that perhaps was even more of a slander in the 1690s than it had been in the 1640s because of the recent fear of having a Catholic king.<sup>90</sup> In addition to this, Edwards also revived the 1640s slanders by accusing Crisp’s opponents of being Royalist, and denounced them as “a spawn or as genuine a spawn

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<sup>87</sup>Young, 10; *Crispianism unmask'd*, 35.

<sup>88</sup> *Crispianism unmask'd*, 63.

<sup>89</sup> Young, 12.

<sup>90</sup> Edwards, 3.

dropt from [Roger L'Estrange] in one sense or another, as can possibly be imagined."<sup>91</sup> Since L'Estrange had been an infamous Royalist during the time of the Civil Wars, this was a harsh accusation to make just after a more powerful and independent Parliament had placed a new king and queen on the throne. However, the accusations did not end there. Crisp's advocates also used the local gossip as a weapon to counteract their opponents' slanderous allegations. In one such instance, an anti-Crisp author found himself defending his integrity against accusations of "coming home Drunk from a Tavern at Eleven of the Clock at Night, and abusing a soldier."<sup>92</sup> Such slanders made Crisp and his followers appear to be the true upholders of the Law while destroying the reputation of their opponents. This bombardment of harsh language and libel illustrated the tension that existed in this debate and the desperation of both sides to create stability in a changing England by winning the most followers.

Finally, around the turn of the century, England once again became stable enough politically and religiously that neither antinomianism nor Crisp and his sermons seemed to be very much of a threat, as religious toleration became more prevalent in a modernizing England. Dr. Tobias Crisp and his sermons, however, were not forgotten as several more editions of his sermons were republished throughout the next century. Despite their republication, the controversy that had plagued the first two publications did not exist over any future editions.<sup>93</sup> Therefore, the controversy that surrounded the 1643 publication and the 1690 publication of Crisp's sermons was unique to those tumultuous time periods.

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<sup>91</sup> Edwards, 16.

<sup>92</sup> Young, 25.

<sup>93</sup> J. Murgatroyd, "The Editor to the Reader" in *Christ alone exalted; in the perfection and encouragements of the saints, notwithstanding sins and trials. Being the complete works of Tobias Crisp, D. D. Sometime Minister of the Gospel at Brinkworth in Wiltshire. Containing fifty-two sermons On Several Select Texts Of Scripture. To which are added notes explanatory of several Passages in them, with memoirs of the doctor's life, &c. &c. By the late Dr. Gill.* Vol.1, 4th ed., corrected, edited by J. Murgatroyd (London: Printed by R. Noble, 1791), passim.

After carefully considering the controversy and false allegations of antinomianism that surrounded the publication of Dr. Crisp's sermons during the English Civil Wars, and then comparing this to the debate that occurred with the republication of the controversial sermons immediately following the Glorious Revolution, it is evident that the rash accusations thrown at Dr. Crisp and his sermons of antinomianism illustrate a common trend of a fear of lawlessness in a society plagued by social, political, and religious unrest, even in the years following the Glorious Revolution. Despite the promise of religious toleration and political stability offered by the accession of King William and Queen Mary to power, England was still in a state of turmoil in the late seventeenth century, with the memory of the horror of the Civil Wars still fresh in the minds of its people. In need of some form of comfort, these people turned to rash accusations and libel in a desperate attempt to create a sense of religious stability through their preferred doctrine. Eventually, this debate would fade into the religious toleration caused by the rise of the modern era, but the habit of resorting to libel, slander, and outright gossip and insults in a conflict in order to become the victor is a trend that has plagued history, and will likely continue to do so.

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