

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE QUESTION
OF NATURAL LAW IN MODERN REFORMED CONVERSATION

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An Integrative Thesis
submitted to the faculty
of Reformed Theological Seminary
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts (Religion)

April 2010

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ABSTRACT
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The topic of natural law has been the focus of renewed interest in the contemporary Reformed community. Some writers have argued for a recovery of the natural law doctrine found in the Reformed heritage, while others have maintained that natural law is of limited usefulness due to the noetic effects of sin. This topic is presently being vigorously debated within the Reformed community. The thesis of this work is that both natural law and Scriptural arguments are permissible and valuable for ethical and civil government discussions in the public square. Following the introduction in chapter 1, biblical and historical surveys are given in chapters 2 and 3. The views of David VanDrunen and John Frame are examined, as representative proponent and critic of natural law, respectively, in chapters 4 and 5. The topic is then analyzed under two major headings: epistemological considerations in chapter 6, and natural law and Scripture in chapter 7. Following the analysis, chapter 8 discusses the difficulties in making natural law arguments. Chapter 9 presents the conclusion and offers suggestions for the relevance of this topic to the life of the church.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The concept of natural law has been a topic of discussion throughout Western history for both Christians and non-Christians. The volume of literature produced on the topic is vast, as even a cursory literature search will reveal. A literature search will also reveal something else: that over the past two hundred years a greater degree of skepticism has arisen regarding the validity of natural law approaches, especially within the protestant community. One reason for this is that protestants often consider natural law theory a “Roman Catholic” or even secular attempt to appropriate moral truth based upon human reason alone, ultimately leading to human autonomy. Other factors have contributed to the skepticism in the Reformed tradition, including the influence of Karl Barth, and the thinking of Cornelius Van Til in conservative Presbyterian circles. But recently there has been a renewed interest in natural law in the Reformed community and new discussions and debates on the topic have emerged.

My motivation for writing on the topic arose largely out of my own ignorance about the precise nature of what was being debated. Why were Reformed theologians and authors debating this topic? What exactly were they disagreeing about? As I began to discuss the topic with local church leaders, many with theological training, I discovered that although many were aware that there was a disagreement, no one seemed to understand the precise nature of the disagreement. I

also found that despite this uncertainty, many did, in fact, have an opinion on natural law, some in favor, and some opposed, but those with an opinion seemed largely unaware of the arguments of the opposing viewpoint. It seemed to me that there was a great deal of confusion on the topic, and that it would be fruitful to compare what the proponents and opponents were actually concerned about, and why this issue is now being debated in the Reformed community.

My approach, then, is to examine the debate from the Reformed perspective, focusing on Reformed thinkers committed to the doctrines of grace, sovereignty of God, sufficiency of Scripture, and the noetic effects of sin on the human race. In order to clearly identify the major differences and better bound the discussion, I chose to compare the views of two leading Reformed theologians writing on natural law today: David VanDrunen, as a representative proponent of natural law, and John Frame, as a representative critic of natural law. Both of these men are solidly within the Reformed tradition and well respected within the theological community. It is my hope that by narrowing the focus to these two authors, the major differences in the two views will be easier to discern.

The term “natural law” may have different connotations, depending upon one’s theological background or persuasion, so it is important that the terminology is clearly defined. VanDrunen writes that “the term generally refers to the moral order inscribed in the world and especially in human nature, an order that is known to all people through their natural faculties (especially reason and/or conscience) even apart from supernatural divine revelation that binds morally the whole of the human race.”¹ Frame defines it as a law that is “understood to be a moral order, found in nature and in man himself. It is accessible through reason and

¹ David VanDrunen, *A Biblical Case for Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute, n.d.), 1. I suspect there should be a comma after “revelation.”

conscience.”² These are two fine definitions that are very similar and will serve as the working definition for this paper. Natural law should not be confused with the “laws of nature,” which refer to those observed “laws,” such as gravity, which govern the physical universe.

There are several other terms and concepts that are closely related to natural law, but must be clearly distinguished from it. *Natural revelation* is that revelation that God gives through the created natural order apart from special revelation, and that is available to all humanity. It is found both in nature itself, and in humanity as created in the image of God. It is sometimes referred to as *general revelation* because it comes to mankind in general. *Special revelation* is the direct, verbal revelation of God as found in the prophets, the divine voice from heaven, and in the Scriptures. *Natural theology* is the study of God through the natural revealed order apart from special revelation. And finally, *common grace* is the non-saving grace that God gives to all mankind, showing kindness to men and restraining sin.

I will argue in this paper that natural law is a valid standard for use in public ethical discussions in the culture, and that it serves a valuable role to that end. I will also argue that Scripture should not be excluded from public ethical discussions, despite the fact that many in the culture do not accept it as a moral standard. The thesis statement is: “Both natural law and Scriptural arguments are permissible and valuable for ethical and civil government discussions in the public square.” I begin by surveying the relevant biblical texts on natural law, and studying the views of two important historical Reformed sources: John Calvin, and the Westminster Standards. I then perform a detailed examination of the positions of David VanDrunen and John Frame. Once their views have been carefully examined, I perform an analysis of their views under two general headings: epistemological considerations, and natural law and Scripture. I

² John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008), 243.

then conclude with a brief summary and offer reflections on the relevance of this study for the life of the church.

CHAPTER 2

BIBLICAL SURVEY

Our source for all doctrine is the Bible, and so the doctrine of natural law, like all others, must be based upon the teaching of Scripture. This chapter will not present an exhaustive study of every potentially relevant passage, but we will survey the major texts relating to natural law. We begin with two of the most important texts found in Paul's letter to the Romans: 1:18-32, and 2:14-15. Romans 1:18-32 reads as follows³:

[18] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. [19] For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. [21] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

[24] Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, [25] because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

[26] For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; [27] and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

[28] And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. [29] They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, [30] slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, [31] foolish, faithless, heartless,

³ All Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

ruthless. [32] Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

This passage touches on many important theological topics and issues, and continues to be a major area of fruitful exegetical study. Paul's purpose in the first three chapters of Romans is to show that all mankind, including both Jews and Gentiles, is sinful and under God's just condemnation for their sin. In chapter 1, Paul is concerned with showing that the Gentiles, those without the special revelation of the Mosaic law, are nevertheless guilty before God because of the knowledge they have. This passage teaches several important things about natural revelation. First of all, it teaches that God has clearly revealed himself to man, specifically the attributes of his eternal power and divinity (1:20). These attributes are likely to be taken as representative of a broader set of God's attributes. Calvin writes that the term "divinity" includes all of his attributes, including "eternity, power, wisdom, goodness, truth, righteousness, and mercy."⁴ Murray takes the same view, saying that "the statement 'eternal power and divinity' is inclusive of a great many invisible attributes." This knowledge comes from the created order apart from supernatural revelation; it is "the truth derived from the observable handiwork of God in the work of creation."⁵ The whole created order testifies to God and his character. This knowledge is *genuine* knowledge, and serves to render mankind without excuse to claim ignorance before God.

Second, the passage teaches that fallen men suppress the truth that they know. Their knowledge does not lead them to honor or thank God as it should, rather, they refuse to acknowledge him (1:28). This refusal to honor God is willful. They exchange the true God for

⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 71.

⁵ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959; paperback ed., 1997), 39; 37.

idols, and worship created things rather than the Creator. Paul gives a list of vices for which they are guilty, and which they continue to practice, even *knowing* that these sins deserve the death penalty (1:32). Moo writes: “Paul speaks of what all people, whether blessed with special revelation or not, can know of God’s just judgment.”⁶ This moral knowledge is quite extensive, covering a wide range of categories of sin. The charge that they do things which “ought not to be done” (1:28) demonstrates that they have a moral obligation before God, an obligation which is known through natural revelation alone. It is noteworthy that this moral knowledge belongs to men in their fallen condition. Murray summarizes it this way: “The most degraded of men, ... are not destitute of the knowledge of God and of his righteous judgments.”⁷ This passage teaches that fallen man has extensive knowledge of God, his moral duties to God, and God’s righteous judgments, all through natural revelation alone.

Nelson Kloosterman presents a contrary interpretation of this passage which is relevant to the natural law question, in which he draws a distinction between “objective” and “subjective” knowledge of the truth. According to this distinction, knowledge of God is objectively manifest, but is not subjectively “apprehended” by fallen man. He uses the illustration that on a cloudy day, the sun can be said to be shining (objective), but the observer cannot see it (subjective). He says that “subjective seeing and knowing depend in part on the disposition of the person as spectator.” They have not come to a “true” and “proper” knowledge of God. On the basis of this interpretation, he concludes: “I deny that unregenerate sinners can derive a true code of morality from creation.” He goes on to say that unregenerate persons are “incapable of apprehending divine truth about right and wrong.” Although natural revelation “communicates truth about God, about right and wrong, and about oneself; nevertheless, special revelation is absolutely

⁶ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 121.

⁷ Murray, 52.

required . . . to apprehend these truths.” He concludes by saying that “Scripture teaches that natural law can never (nor could ever) be rightly apprehended apart from special revelation.”⁸

In response to this, we can agree that there are both objective and subjective aspects to God’s revelation: it is objectively manifest, and yet must be subjectively accepted by the observer. The question is whether fallen man does have any subjective knowledge of God’s moral revelation, and whether he has any knowledge of right and wrong. Kloosterman argues that he does not attain subjective knowledge of God, and that he does not apprehend divine truth about right and wrong apart from special revelation. But this passage teaches exactly the opposite. It teaches that fallen men do know God, although they willfully distort and suppress this knowledge. Kloosterman does not deal with the explicit references to the knowledge of God (1:20,21,32). Moo rejects the argument that God’s truth is not subjectively perceived by all men, saying that “to however limited an extent, they subjectively perceive this knowledge.”⁹ Furthermore, the passage teaches that all men do have knowledge of right and wrong, and knowledge that disobedience to the law brings condemnation. Our human experience also manifestly demonstrates that fallen people do indeed have a knowledge of right and wrong apart from special revelation through common grace and the working of the conscience. Therefore, Kloosterman’s interpretation should be rejected in favor of the traditional interpretation given above.

The second passage, Romans 2:14-15, is equally important to our topic: “[14] (Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, [15] since they show that the requirements

⁸ Nelson Kloosterman, “A Biblical Case For Natural Law: A Response Essay,” *Ordained Servant* 16 (2007): 101; 102.

⁹ Moo, 123, see also 105.

of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.)” In chapter 2, Paul has turned his attention to the Jew, and in this passage mentions that even the Gentiles, although they do not have the Mosaic law, nevertheless know the requirements of the law. Calvin writes that this means there are “some notions of justice and rectitude . . . which are implanted by nature in the hearts of men.” Nature is “set in opposition to a written law, meaning that the Gentiles had the natural light of righteousness, which supplied the place of that law by which the Jews were instructed.”¹⁰ Murray believes that the “law” of which Gentiles are aware is God’s moral law: “It is not therefore a different law that confronts the Gentiles who are without the law but the same law brought to bear upon them by a different method of revelation.”¹¹ The requirements of this law are “written on the heart,” showing that it is universally available to all men, and that it is perceived through the operation of conscience. Paul is here speaking of post-lapsarian humanity, and so, just as in chapter 1, such knowledge continues despite man’s fall into sin. The conscience is the vehicle by which their conduct is measured against the standards of God’s law, which results in their either accusing or defending themselves as to how they measure up to such standards. The phrase “law for themselves” does not refer to relativism or human autonomy. Murray writes: “It means almost the opposite, that they themselves, by reason of what is implanted in their nature, confront themselves with the law of God. They themselves reveal the law of God to themselves – their persons is the medium of revelation.”¹² Calvin summarizes by saying, “There is then a certain knowledge of the law by nature, which says, ‘This is good and

¹⁰ Calvin, *Romans*, 96-97.

¹¹ Murray, 74.

¹² *Ibid.*, 73.

worthy of being desired; that ought to be abhorred.’”¹³

Psalm 19:1-4a is another important text that describes the clarity and extent of God’s natural revelation:

- [1] The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.
- [2] Day to day pours out speech,
and night to night reveals knowledge.
- [3] There is no speech, nor are there words,
whose voice is not heard.
- [4a] Their measuring line goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

In Psalm 19, David writes of both of God’s books of revelation: the book of nature (1-4a) and the book of Scripture (7-11). Even though the natural revelation is not perceived through audible or written words, nevertheless it is, by analogy, proclaimed with the same clarity and power. The revelation is not only clear, but it is loudly proclaimed. Calvin calls attention to these two aspects, writing: “First, that the glory of God is written and imprinted in the heavens, as in an open volume which all men may read; and, secondly, that, at the same time, they give forth a loud and distinct voice, which reaches the ears of all men, and causes itself to be heard in all places.”¹⁴ The poetic picture teaches that the whole created order communicates knowledge of God’s glory and his handiwork. This revealed knowledge goes out to the entire world and all nations. Even though the nations are divided by the barrier of language, this revelation is universally understood. This revelation is always present, being poured out day after day and night after night. Several commentators note that the orderly succession of day and night itself is part of the revelation of God. Not only do the heavens declare the glory of God, but the arrangement of time, days, and seasons is regulated by his wisdom, and so also adds to his glory.

¹³ Calvin, *Romans*, 98.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, Vol. 1, trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 313.

Kidner believes Paul may have this psalm in mind in Romans 1 where Paul teaches that God's attributes are clearly perceived through the creation.¹⁵ This psalm teaches that mankind cannot help but have knowledge of God because his entire creation speaks clearly of the Creator.

Another reference to this idea, if not this actual psalm, occurs in Paul's sermon in Lystra where he proclaims that God "did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). Paul points to the created order, including rain, seasons, and crops to show that these things bear witness to God himself and his goodness.

In his speech to the Athenians in Acts 17, Paul starts with the natural knowledge of the people which caused them to be "very religious," even to the point of worshiping the unknown god. Many see in this text the operation of natural revelation. Calvin comments on this passage as follows: "Whithersoever they cast their eyes upward or downward, they must need light upon lively and also infinite images of God's power, wisdom, and goodness. For God hath not darkly shadowed his glory in the creation of the world, but he hath everywhere engraven such manifest marks, that even blind men may know them by groping." Calvin interprets the phrase, "he is not far from each one of us," to imply the inner knowledge of God. He writes: "For though no corner of the world be void of the testimony of God's glory, yet we need not go without ourselves to lay hold upon him." Man himself is "a little world, . . . a token of God's glory."¹⁶

Finally, we briefly consider several texts which may indirectly refer to the natural law. The first two are the parallel cases of Abraham and Isaac passing their wives off as their sisters for fear of death. In both situations, the ruler in the area was named Abimelech, and in both

¹⁵ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1973), 97.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. 2, trans. Christopher Fetherstone, ed. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 166; 167.

cases the ruler confronted the patriarchs for acting unjustly towards him. In Genesis 20:6, Abimelech confronted Abraham saying: “What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done.” Later, in Genesis 26:10, a different Abimelech confronted Abraham’s son Isaac, saying, “What is this you have done to us? One of the people might easily have lain with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us.” What is striking about both of these cases is that a pagan ruler, one without special revelation, confronts one of the patriarchs about an unjust action which would have brought guilt upon them. Both of these instances seem to manifest a common moral knowledge available to all humanity. David VanDrunen believes both of these are instances of appeal to natural law. Commenting on Genesis 20:6, he writes: “Abimelech’s appeal to things that should not be done manifests the reality of some sort of common moral knowledge, standard, and responsibility.”¹⁷ Calvin draws a similar conclusion from Genesis 26:10:

We gather, besides, from the words of Abimelech, that all nations have the sentiment impressed upon their minds, that the violation of holy wedlock is a crime worthy of divine vengeance, and have consequently a dread of the judgment of God. For although the minds of men are darkened with dense clouds, so that they are frequently deceived; yet God has caused some power of discrimination between right and wrong to remain, so that each should bear about with him his own condemnation, and that all should be without excuse.¹⁸

It seems likely that in both of these cases, the pagan king is appealing to a common moral knowledge available apart from special revelation.

The last indirect reference is found in Amos 1:3-2:3. In this passage, Amos condemns neighboring nations surrounding Israel for their sins using the rhetorical formula: “For three sins...and for four.” The condemnation of each nation is not based upon the Mosaic law or

¹⁷ VanDrunen, *Biblical Case*, 43.

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of Genesis*, Vol. 1, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 63.

special revelation, but upon the basis of common injustices and violence against other nations. The basis for the condemnation is made more striking when compared with the basis of the condemnation of Judah in 2:4-5: that of rejecting the law of the Lord. VanDrunen argues that this is a good example of the nations being held responsible to the natural law.¹⁹ J.A. Motyer sees a direct parallel between this passage and Paul's description of judgment based upon natural revelation in Romans 1. He concludes that these nations "were without special revelation but not without moral responsibility; . . . they were without the law written upon tables of stone but not without the law written in the conscience."²⁰

There are also a number of passages in Scripture that speak of the devastating effects of the fall upon man's knowledge. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul vividly contrasts the life of the Gentiles in the Ephesian church before and after they experienced God's saving power in Christ. He describes their condition before Christ as being "dead" (2:1) and "darkness" (5:8), illustrating the utter hopelessness of their condition apart from Christ. He exhorts the church in chapter 4 to put off the old and to put on the new, now that they are in Christ, and being renewed after his image (4:22-24; see also Rom. 6:1-18, 12:2, Col. 3:1-11). In this context, he speaks of the thinking of the Gentiles as being "futile" (4:17; see also Rom. 1:21), and that they are "darkened in their understanding" (4:18). In Romans 3, Paul quotes extensively from the Old Testament to prove that all men are sinful and that no one seeks God. One section of this quotation says that "no one understands; no one seeks for God" (3:11). In Romans 8:7, he says that "the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot." In First Corinthians, he contrasts the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of

¹⁹ VanDrunen, *Biblical Case*, 51-52.

²⁰ J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Amos*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1974), 37.

God, teaching that the fallen man is not able to understand the “things of the Spirit of God” (see 1:18-25, 2:14-16).

Such passages may call into question whether unbelievers can really have moral knowledge apart from God’s saving grace. It is from passages such as these that we derive the doctrine of total depravity. This doctrine summarizes the teaching of Scripture that man is completely fallen in every aspect of his being, and that he is without hope of salvation apart from God’s regenerating power. Does the doctrine of total depravity imply that natural law has no usefulness in the fallen world? It is important to bear in mind what total depravity means and what it does not mean. Total depravity means that man is totally corrupt in every part of his being; that there is no area of his being that is not affected by the fall, and that he can do no good in a salvific sense apart from God's regenerating saving grace. But it does not mean that man is as bad as he could be. By God’s common grace, man continues to have moral knowledge, and can and still does perform many outwardly good acts.²¹ So total depravity means that man can do no *saving* good; it does not mean that he is incapable of having moral knowledge through God’s natural revelation and common grace.

In context, these passages teach that man’s thinking is futile and darkened with respect to saving knowledge of God, and that God’s saving grace is necessary to renew man’s mind so that he can rightly understand his need to repent of his sin and believe in Christ. But these passages, and others, also indicate that the fallen man is in rebellion against God, and his mind is captive to sinful patterns of thinking. This fact means that fallen man will distort the moral knowledge that

²¹ See John Murray, "Common Grace," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1977), 93-119; John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559 ed., trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John McNeill (Louisville: Westminster, 1960), 2.12-17; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, combined ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 432-446; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 654-675.

he has from natural revelation, resulting in an ongoing tension between what he knows to be true and his desire to live autonomously apart from God's moral law. This tension will be explored further in a later chapter as it relates to fallen man's understanding of the natural law. It is my view that these passages which speak of man's distortion of his knowledge have primary reference to saving knowledge, and thus do not mitigate the overwhelming testimony of the other passages considered in this chapter which speak of man's continuing moral knowledge through natural revelation.

This brief survey of biblical passages pertaining to natural law demonstrates that God has provided revelation in his creation, and this revelation includes, at a minimum, his own existence and attributes, absolute moral standards, and accountability to these standards. This revelation has been made in the created order of nature itself, and also within the heart of man, as created in his image. Although the fall of man distorts his apprehension of this revelation such that no saving benefit can be obtained from it, nevertheless, it continues to function in his reason and conscience so as to render him inexcusable before God. Furthermore, such knowledge continues to proclaim the standards of right and wrong such that all men have a moral conscience with respect to their personal conduct and in fact, can and do, make right moral judgments.

CHAPTER 3

SELECTIVE REFORMED HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Introduction

David VanDrunen and Stephen Grabill, among others, have argued that there is a rich natural law theology throughout the Reformed tradition, beginning with the early Reformers and continuing into the nineteenth century. VanDrunen writes: “In the subsequent Reformed tradition [after Calvin], as in other Protestant traditions, natural law remained a staple of sound doctrine in the centuries that followed.”²² While acknowledging the wide range of material available on natural law in the Reformed sources, this selective survey will focus on two sources that have a great deal of influence within Reformed and Presbyterian circles to the present day: John Calvin, and the Westminster Standards.

John Calvin

The Interpretation Debate

John Calvin remains a leading figure in Reformed theology and is therefore specially relevant to any historical consideration of the doctrine of natural law. Some scholars have tried to drive a wedge between Calvin and his successors in his theology in general, and between Calvin and his predecessors with respect to the doctrine of natural law in particular. Both of these approaches have been used to try to show that Calvin was skeptical of the validity of

²² VanDrunen, *Biblical Case*, 3.

natural law. But recent work by scholars such as Richard Muller and Stephen Grabill has demonstrated that there is a strong continuity between Calvin and his post-Reformation successors. And with respect to his predecessors, John McNeill has written that “there is no real discontinuity between the teaching of the Reformers and that of their predecessors with respect to natural law. . . . Natural law is not one of the issues on which they bring the Scholastics under criticism.”²³ Even so, Calvin’s view of natural law continues to be debated to the present day. Some understand Calvin to fully affirm the validity of natural law, but others claim that Calvin’s emphasis on the noetic effects of sin show that he did not think that natural revelation could provide genuine knowledge after the fall.

Susan Schreiner presents an excellent summary of the debate on this issue going back to 1909, including the influential Barth-Brunner controversy, and subsequent writers up to the present day.²⁴ Following this summary, she writes: “This brief survey shows that Calvin’s theology betrays a certain ambivalence about natural law that has allowed scholars to draw sharply different conclusions.”²⁵ David VanDrunen writes: “That Calvin appealed to the concept of natural law on numerous occasions is a simple fact, but interpretation of these appeals has long puzzled and divided scholars.”²⁶ While recognizing that some have offered mediating positions, VanDrunen divides the debate into two major categories: those who stress discontinuity between Calvin and his medieval predecessors and those who highlight the continuity.

²³ John McNeill, “Natural Law in the Teaching of the Reformers,” *Journal of Religion* 26.3 (July 1946), 168. See also Stephen Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 70-76.

²⁴ Susan Schreiner, “Calvin’s Use of Natural Law,” in *A Persevering Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 51-55. See also Grabill, *Rediscovering*, 4-7.

²⁵ Schreiner, 54-55.

²⁶ David VanDrunen, “The Context of Natural Law: John Calvin’s Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” *Journal of Church and State* 46.3 (Summer 2004), 503.

The disagreement in interpretation is due in part to the fact that Calvin does not deal directly with the question of natural law in a single place or in a systematic way, but rather, his view must be constructed based on various statements he makes throughout his writings, especially his *Institutes* and commentaries. Many have found his various statements hard to reconcile and VanDrunen acknowledges that Calvin made statements that “at first blush seem contradictory.”²⁷ The extensive literature on the subject indicates that this is a complex question, and any survey treatment such as this runs the risk of over-simplification. Yet, it is my conviction that Calvin did affirm the value of natural law through common grace, and that his view becomes relatively clear when his distinction between “heavenly” and “earthly things” is properly understood.

Heavenly and Earthly Things

Calvin distinguished between “heavenly things,” those things pertaining to God’s kingdom, and “earthly things,” those things pertaining to the present life here below. This distinction corresponds to the supernatural versus natural gifts; supernatural gifts being the sufficient means to attain heavenly life and eternal bliss. These supernatural gifts were “stripped” in the fall, and men are now blinded to saving knowledge of God, until they are restored through the grace of regeneration and the illumination of God’s Spirit. The natural gifts are retained, but corrupted by sin. This corruption means that things are not as they should be, and the natural gifts do not lead man to saving knowledge of God, yet general equity is preserved by the remaining knowledge that man has through nature. When Calvin speaks of the corruption of the mind, heart, and will of man by sin, and the resulting inability to find truth, he is, in

²⁷ Ibid., 505.

context, referring to the truth of attaining to salvation, the “heavenly things.”²⁸ But he has much to say of the value of the natural gifts, and their relevance to “earthly things.”

This distinction then also applies to two categories of knowledge. There is a knowledge through natural revelation that is sufficient for general equity in earthly things. But Calvin most often uses the term “knowledge” to refer to the higher and saving knowledge of God and of heavenly things. For instance, he writes that “the knowledge of God, as I understand it, is that by which we not only conceive that there is a God but also grasp what befits us and is proper to his glory, in fine, what is to our advantage to know of him. Indeed, we shall not say that, properly speaking, God is known where there is no religion or piety.” The knowledge of God to which we are called is “not that knowledge which, content with empty speculation, merely flits in the brain, but that which will be sound and fruitful if we duly perceive it, and if it takes root in the heart.” Without spiritual illumination, man’s mind is blinded “as far as the knowledge of God is concerned.”²⁹ The “knowledge” Calvin writes of here is saving, effective knowledge which leads to the end of knowing and glorifying God. I suspect his use of “knowledge” in this way has led some to the conclusion that Calvin denied the value of the knowledge gained through natural revelation. But I believe this is simply a misunderstanding of his use of the term in context.

For instance, Calvin speaks quite negatively at times about the fallen man’s natural knowledge. He writes that fallen men “entangle themselves in such a huge mass of errors that blind wickedness stifles and finally extinguishes those sparks which once flashed forth to show them God’s glory.” Commenting on human superstition, he writes that “it is sufficiently clear from so many corruptions how horrible is the blindness of the human mind.” And from this blindness, “it appears that if men were taught only by nature, they would hold to nothing certain

²⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.13; 2.2.12; 2.2.12-13.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.2.1, see also 1.2.2; 1.5.9; 2.2.19.

or solid or clear-cut, but would be so tied to confused principles as to worship an unknown god.” In one final example, he writes: “But man is so shrouded in the darkness of errors that he hardly begins to grasp through this natural law what worship is acceptable to God.”³⁰ In context, each of these statements has to do with *saving* knowledge, knowledge that leads to a right response to God’s natural revelation. We can make sense of such negative assessments of man’s natural knowledge when we recognize the distinction Calvin has in mind between earthly and heavenly things, and the corresponding aspects of knowledge. This is why man’s knowledge can be seen as utterly corrupted in one sense (heavenly), and yet quite valuable in another sense for culture and general equity (earthly).

This distinction also extends to government. Calvin speaks of a “twofold government,” one that pertains to the inner man and eternal life, and the other which “pertains only to the establishment of civil justice and outward morality.” This distinction is directly related to the distinctions above between heavenly and earthly things: “But whoever knows how to distinguish between body and soul, between this present fleeting life and that future eternal life, will without difficulty know that Christ’s spiritual Kingdom and the civil jurisdiction are things completely distinct.”³¹ David VanDrunen has argued that Calvin’s seemingly contradictory statements on natural law are resolved by recognizing this important distinction.³² In essence, he argues that Calvin viewed any action performed apart from the saving grace of Christ to be sinful and displeasing in God’s sight with respect to salvation, but that the same action could be of great value in the civil realm.³³ Stephen Grabill notes that:

³⁰ Ibid., 1.4.4; 1.5.12; 1.5.12; 2.8.1.

³¹ Ibid., 4.20.1.

³² See VanDrunen, “Calvin’s Doctrine.” VanDrunen’s own view is discussed later in this paper.

³³ VanDrunen, “Calvin’s Doctrine,” 524.

Calvin distinguishes between ‘heavenly’ and ‘earthly’ sorts of intelligence, each of which is able to function competently within its proper sphere. The pure knowledge of God, the nature of true righteousness, and the mysteries of the heavenly kingdom are associated with the former sort, while governance, household management, mechanical skills, and the liberal arts, including the discipline of ethics, are associated with the latter sort.³⁴

Susan Schreiner also finds this distinction to be critical in understanding Calvin’s view of natural law. She writes that Calvin’s “positive references to ‘nature’ and ‘natural law’ are explained by the separation Calvin drew between the natural and spiritual realms.” Schreiner believes that this distinction clarifies the function of the natural knowledge according to Calvin. In matters of salvation, such knowledge only renders us inexcusable, but such knowledge has positive effects in matters of the earthly realm.³⁵

The Place of Natural Law

Once Calvin’s distinction between “heavenly” and “earthly things” is understood, one can better appreciate his statements regarding natural revelation and the natural law. He maintains that the knowledge of God shines forth through his creation for all to see, and he often speaks of God’s works of creation as a glorious “theatre.”³⁶ God reveals himself “in the whole workmanship of the universe,” and “there is no one to whom the Lord does not abundantly show his wisdom.” God’s natural revelation is not only external, but penetrates the human heart: “There is within the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity.” This awareness is “a certain understanding of his divine majesty.” There is “a sense of deity inscribed

³⁴ Grabill, *Rediscovering*, 71.

³⁵ Schreiner, 60; 73.

³⁶ See, for instance, Calvin’s *Institutes*, 1.5.8, 1.6.2, 1.14.20, 2.6.1, 3.9.2.

in the hearts of all.” It is “naturally inborn in all, and is fixed deep within.” It “can never be effaced,” and although men try to evade it, “nature itself permits no one to forget.”³⁷

Commenting on Romans 2:14-15, Calvin writes: “There is nothing more common than for a man to be sufficiently instructed in a right standard of conduct by natural law.” But without spiritual insight, fallen man cannot attain to the right rule of conduct in this life, because he does not put his natural knowledge of God and the law to its proper use, that of glorifying God and being in right relationship with him. “It is therefore in vain that so many burning lamps shine for us in the workmanship of the universe to show forth the glory of its Author. Although they bathe us wholly in their radiance, yet they can of themselves in no way lead us into the right path [salvation].” Therefore, the natural law serves to condemn fallen man. “The purpose of natural law, therefore, is to render man inexcusable. This would not be a bad definition: natural law is that apprehension of the conscience which distinguishes sufficiently between just and unjust, and which deprives men of the excuse of ignorance, while it proves them guilty by their own testimony.” The “spectacles” of Scripture are required to rise up to the genuine, saving knowledge of God, which can only be accomplished by the “inner revelation of God through faith.”³⁸

For Calvin, there is a single law of God, which is expressed both in nature and in written form. He writes: “Now that inward law, which we have above described as written, even engraved, upon the hearts of all, in a sense asserts the very same things that are to be learned from the two Tables.” He later writes: “It is a fact that the law of God which we call the moral law is nothing else than a testimony of natural law and of that conscience which God has

³⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.5.1; 1.3.1; 1.3.3.

³⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.22; 1.6.14; 2.2.22; 1.5.14, see also 1.6.1.

engraved upon the minds of men.”³⁹ VanDrunen states that for Calvin, “Even the Mosaic law, which contains the only comprehensive body of civil law found in Scripture, was simply a wise application of a more basic law – natural law – that is to underlie all civil enactments.”⁴⁰

Schreiner summarizes Calvin’s view as follows: “The Decalogue is a specially accommodated restatement of the law of nature, a restatement that brings a ‘clearer witness’ of that which had become obscure.”⁴¹

The observation that some seem to act with complete lawlessness does not nullify the fact that they know the law of God, and retain “the original conception of equity.” Despite human frailty, “the fact remains that some seed of political order has been implanted in all men. And this is ample proof that in the arrangement of this life [“earthly things”] no man is without the light of reason.” Calvin writes:

Consequently, we observe that there exist in all men’s minds universal impressions of a certain civic fair dealing and order. Hence no man is to be found who does not understand that every sort of human organization must be regulated by laws, and who does not comprehend the principles of those laws. Hence arises that unvarying consent of all nations and of individual mortals with regard to laws. For their seeds have, without teacher or lawgiver, been implanted in all men”⁴²

So although the natural law is useless to bring men to saving knowledge of God through Christ, it continues to function as a standard for civil equity and justice.

Summary of Calvin’s View

In summary then, while not minimizing the complexity of the ongoing analysis of Calvin’s view, I submit that Calvin certainly affirmed the ongoing post-lapsarian validity of the

³⁹ Ibid., 2.8.1; 4.20.16.

⁴⁰ VanDrunen, “Calvin’s Doctrine,” 523.

⁴¹ Schreiner, 57.

⁴² Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.13.

natural law. Any seemingly contradictory statements that he makes about the knowledge of God can be reconciled when we recognize the distinction he made between knowledge required for salvation and knowledge to uphold general equity in earthly things. While the natural law serves to condemn in the realm of salvation, it continues to provide a basis for equity and justice in civil government and general morality. Grabill sums up by noting that although Calvin believed the purpose of the natural law was to render men inexcusable in matters of salvation, yet “for Calvin, the nonsaving, natural knowledge of God still functions competently in the earthly spheres of law, society, politics, economics, and ethics.”⁴³

The Westminster Standards

The second major source we will survey is the Westminster Standards, which was produced in the mid-Seventeenth century, and remains the confessional standard for all conservative Presbyterian communions. We find that the concepts of natural revelation and natural law are quite prominent in the Standards. Throughout the Standards, natural revelation is commonly referred to as the “light of nature,” and meets us in the very opening words of the Confession of Faith: “Although the light of nature and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God” (WCF 1.1).⁴⁴ At one point, this term seems to refer to “common sense” (WCF 1.6), but the usual meaning throughout the Standards is a light that all mankind has and through which they are aware of a standard for how they are to live. The normative status of this light is attested to when the Confession speaks of practices that are “contrary to the light of nature” (WCF 20.4). The Confession also uses the term *law* in one

⁴³ Grabill, *Rediscovering*, 84. See also 91-92.

⁴⁴ Quotations are taken from *Westminster Confession of Faith*, reprint ed. (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian, 1994). Parenthetical references use WCF to refer to the Confession section, WLC to refer to the Westminster Larger Catechism number, and WSC to refer to the Westminster Shorter Catechism number.

place: “law of nature” (WCF 21.7). And so, in referring to the “light of nature,” the authors clearly have in mind a naturally revealed law that is binding upon all men. The prooftexts that are given vary in different places, but are most typically Romans 2:14-15, 1:19-20, 1:32, and Psalm 19:1-3. There are also other passages used as prooftexts for the manifestation of the attributes of God.⁴⁵ One other reference of interest is found in section 19.4, which refers to a requirement for “general equity” in the context of judicial law. This passage seems to be referring to a knowledge, known by all, of what constitutes fair treatment in judicial matters, and thus is a component of the natural law. VanDrunen has argued from this particular reference that the intent of the Confession at this point was to make “natural law the standard for contemporary civil law.”⁴⁶

A striking feature of the way the Standards handle the natural law is that they equate it with the moral law, and therefore, much of what is said about the moral law is actually being said about the natural law as well. This is made clear by cross referencing statements made in different places in the Standards. In chapter 19 of the Confession, we read that God gave Adam a law (WCF 19.1, WSC 40), which continued after the fall (WCF 19.2, WLC 94) and is commonly called the “moral law” (WCF 19.3, WLC 92). What is the law that God gave to Adam? The Standards differentiate this law from the command not to eat of the fruit (WCF 4.2, WLC 92), so the divine command is not in view here. Comparing section 4.2, we find that this law is the “law of God written in their hearts.”⁴⁷ Another confirmation of this is that Romans 2:14-15 is given as a prooftext of section 19.1, again indicating that the law here has reference to Paul’s statement that the Gentiles show that the “requirements of the law are written on their hearts,” or the

⁴⁵ See, for instance, WCF 4.1.

⁴⁶ David VanDrunen, “The Role of Natural Law in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Reformed Orthodoxy,” *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century Conference*, Pittsburgh, PA., 1-2 July 2005., 17.

⁴⁷ See also WLC 17.

natural law. And so, when the Standards speak of the moral law given to Adam, they are referring to the natural law written in the heart. This moral law is then summarized in the Ten Commandments (WCF 19.2, WLC 98, WSC 41). Therefore, it seems clear that the Standards equate the moral law with the natural law, and view the Ten Commandments as a summary of this single, unified divine law. VanDrunen argues that the teaching of the Standards at this point is consistent with the “commonplace” teaching of Reformed theology leading up to the time of the Westminster Assembly.⁴⁸

One interesting and perhaps unexpected reference to natural law is found in chapter 21 on the Sabbath. We read here that the requirement for the setting apart of “a due proportion of time” for God’s worship is known from the “law of nature,” and that further revelation from God’s Word tells us that this is to be one day out of seven (WCF 21.7). Francis Beattie comments here that “the duty of the worship of God has both a natural and a revealed basis and sanction.”⁴⁹ We might say that the Standards teach a hierarchy of revealed information about the Sabbath: Natural revelation informs us of our duty to set aside due time to worship God, special revelation informs us that this is to be one day out of seven, and then the New Testament further tells us this day is to be the first day of the week following the resurrection of Christ. One other interesting statement is made in the Larger Catechism, answer 121, which says that there “is less light of nature for [the Sabbath].” This statement seems to indicate that there are varying degrees of clarity within the natural law, and that keeping the Sabbath is one such area which is not as clear from natural revelation alone. This statement again affirms that this is a requirement known through natural law, even if it is not as clear as other requirements.

⁴⁸ VanDrunen, “Westminster,” 10.

⁴⁹ Francis Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards* (Greenville: Southern Presbyterian Press, n.d.), 260.

According to the Standards, natural revelation has several functions after the fall for all mankind. First, it manifests God and many of his attributes, such as his goodness, wisdom, power, and lordship, and that he is to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served (WCF 1.1, 4.1, 21.1, WLC 2, 95). This knowledge of God is especially made manifest in the works of creation and providence (WCF 1.1, 4.1, 5.1, 5.4). Second, it provides a standard which is binding on all mankind (WCF 19.5, WLC 92, 93). Third, it informs mankind of duty (WCF 21.1, 21.7, WLC 95). Fourth, it makes men inexcusable before God (WCF 1.1, WLC 96). Fifth, it informs mankind of his inability to keep the law (WLC 95). The natural revelation is insufficient for salvation, and Scripture is required to provide knowledge of the redemptive work of God (WCF 1.1, 10.4, WLC 2, 60). Beattie, commenting on chapter 1 of the Confession, summarizes as follows: “The light of nature is thus adequate to ground man’s responsibility to God, and to make it just for God to punish man for disobedience. In this way the Standards assume the validity and value of natural religion, and it is upon this sure basis that revealed religion is made to rest.”⁵⁰

And so in this brief survey of the teaching of the Westminster Standards we have seen that natural revelation and the associated natural law were an important part of the divines’ thinking and theology, and that they equated the natural law with the moral law. The moral law, and therefore, also the natural law,⁵¹ is summarized in the Ten Commandments. The Standards teach that natural revelation continues after the fall and has a variety of functions even for unbelievers, including informing them of God and his attributes, and their duty before him. This duty includes upholding the requirements of “general equity” in the judicial realm. And so, it is clear that by their many significant references to the “light of nature,” both in revealing God and

⁵⁰ Beattie, 44.

⁵¹ Compare VanDrunen’s term “natural moral law,” found in “Westminster,” 6.

man's duty before him, the Westminster divines desired to highlight the importance of both natural revelation and natural law, and their continuing relevance even after the fall.

CHAPTER 4

MODERN REFORMED DEFENSE

Background

In recent years, there has been somewhat of a revival of discussion of natural law in the Reformed community. Several authors have taken up the topic in order to recapture what they claim to be a biblical view of natural law that is faithful to the Reformed heritage. Theologians and authors such as Michael Horton, Stephen Grabill and David VanDrunen have produced a number of writings on the subject. These writings have sparked new debate, receiving criticism from some quarters, while being enthusiastically received by others. One non-Reformed author warrants notice because of his recent significant writings in the field: J. Budziszewski. Budziszewski is a former evangelical now turned Roman Catholic. Although he writes from a Roman Catholic perspective, he avoids many of the traditional pitfalls of Catholic natural law thinking (e.g., the charge of human autonomy and naturalistic fallacies), and makes valuable contributions to the discussion. David VanDrunen is a significant contemporary Reformed writer, because of the volume and scope of material he has written, but especially because of his biblical approach to the subject and the persuasiveness of his arguments. I have therefore selected him as an excellent contemporary Reformed representative of natural law thinking, and will examine his views in some detail.

David VanDrunen

Introduction

David VanDrunen is perhaps the most visible Reformed theologian writing in support of natural law today. VanDrunen is trained in both law and theology, and is currently the professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics at Westminster Seminary California. He has written a number of important works relating to natural law and ethics. One of his most important works thus far on this subject is his small book, *A Biblical Case for Natural Law*. As the title suggests, VanDrunen labors to show that natural law is a biblical concept, and he identifies and addresses several common objections to natural law. This book is also helpful in understanding his view of the two kingdoms, and how he relates that to natural versus special revelation. Another important work is his paper presented at The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century Conference in July, 2005, entitled, “The Role of Natural Law in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Reformed Orthodoxy.” These two important works will serve as the basis for much of the discussion of his views in this paper. He has written several other works on this topic including both scholarly and popular articles, a reply to a review of his book which was printed in *Ordained Servant*, and his most recent publication, *Bioethics and the Christian Life: A Guide to Making Difficult Decisions*.⁵² He is currently working on a more comprehensive work on natural law and the two kingdoms that has yet to be published.⁵³

VanDrunen is troubled that the doctrine of natural law has been the subject of intense skepticism over the past two centuries, and his desire is to recapture the richness of the natural law teaching found first in the Bible, and then throughout the history of Christian theology, and

⁵² David VanDrunen, *Bioethics and the Christian Life: A Guide to Making Difficult Decisions* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009).

⁵³ Since this writing, this book has been published: *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

especially that teaching found in the Reformed tradition. As he develops his case, he is sensitive to the objections that are typically raised against the use of natural law, and these are stated explicitly in *A Biblical Case for Natural Law*. Stephen Grabill presents two standard objections in the foreword to the book. These are: 1) that natural law makes God and Scripture irrelevant to moral knowledge, and 2) that natural law turns a blind eye to the effects of sin on reason and human nature.⁵⁴ VanDrunen expands these two objections into four traditional concerns with natural law in the protestant tradition, and sets out to provide biblical and historical arguments that address these four concerns. The four concerns he lists are: 1) that natural law detracts from the authority and priority of Scripture, 2) that natural law makes human nature rather than God the moral authority, leading to human autonomy, 3) that natural law does not take the fall and its impact of moral reasoning seriously, and 4) that natural law presents a monolithic moral standard that cannot account for historical development of the biblical teaching on ethics.

His thesis in *A Biblical Case* is that “contemporary Christians not only may, but ought, embrace the doctrine of natural law as a biblical teaching that has great significance for life in a fallen world.” In another place he makes the claim that “despite the ravages of sin, natural law remains a useful, and even necessary, idea for understanding life in the fallen world.”⁵⁵

One of his main concerns is that Christians can and must interact with unbelievers in the public square without requiring that they accept the Scriptures as their moral standard. This is a very practical concern because it reflects the reality of life in a fallen world. VanDrunen’s concern is to live at peace with all people as much as possible, not by compromising the teaching of Scripture, but rather by advancing moral truth by appealing to what people already naturally know apart from Scripture. He puts it this way: “Appealing to natural law is, in short, a means

⁵⁴ VanDrunen, *Biblical Case*, i.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5; 23.

for moving forward in social matters in a way that both treats all people with civility and respect and also seeks to advance truth and justice.”⁵⁶ He expresses his opposition to approaches that require appeal to Scripture in order to reason with unbelievers in the public square on ethical issues.

The Knowledge of Natural Law

VanDrunen argues that the foundation of natural law is God’s own righteous character as a moral being, and then man’s created nature as the image of God. Therefore, man is also a moral being and this moral nature is central to the existence of the natural law. He writes: “Human beings, by nature, are righteous and holy and know the moral standard to which they are bound.” One important aspect of imaging God is exercising dominion over creation in righteousness and holiness, under the authority of the Creator. He writes, “The image of God carried along with it a natural law, a law inherent to human nature and directing human beings to fulfill their royal commission in righteousness and holiness.”⁵⁷ By placing the natural law in this context, VanDrunen clearly states that the natural law bears the authority of God himself, and therefore should never be seen as an attempt to set man up as an autonomous authority apart from God. God, and not man, is the moral authority behind the natural law, and this authority is expressed in the moral nature of man as God’s image. He writes that “the natural law is in fact given by God and bears its authority from him.” Therefore, “Natural law reflects who God is and how he has related to the world.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ David VanDrunen, “Natural Law and Christians in the Public Square,” *Modern Reformation* 15.2 (March/April 2006).

⁵⁷ VanDrunen, *Biblical Case*, 13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 7; 14.

Having set the discussion of natural law in the context of man as God's moral image bearer under the commission to exercise dominion over the creation, VanDrunen then turns to the effect of the fall. After summarizing the effect of sin on the world, and how it is vividly presented in Romans 1:18-32, he writes:

Contemporary use of natural law cannot ignore the grave consequences of sin upon human knowledge and the reception of natural law. Likewise, the absolute necessity of special, biblical revelation for knowing the way of salvation from sin offered in Christ must be affirmed. These affirmations, however, do not themselves demand the conclusion that natural law has no more usefulness. In fact, Scripture itself gives many reasons to appreciate the importance – even the necessity – of using and appealing to natural law in this fallen world.”⁵⁹

VanDrunen directly addresses the objection that natural law does not take account of the effects of the fall, and presents three reasons why natural law continues to exist after the fall, that man still knows it, and that it continues to be useful in the fallen world. Having previously identified the image of God as an important consideration in understanding the natural law, he first argues that the image of God continues after the fall, although it is marred by sin. His argument here follows the standard Reformed biblical argument for continuation of the image, drawing on Genesis 9:6, and James 3:9. Second, he argues that Scripture teaches that natural law also continues in the fallen world and fallen man still has some knowledge of it, based upon Romans 1:18-32. He argues here that man not only has moral knowledge, but that this moral knowledge is “practically comprehensive” based upon the extent of the list of sins of which fallen man is aware. He summarizes this point in this way: “*All people know*, by nature, that the comprehensive list of sins in the preceding verses are not only wrong but deserve God's judgment. There is still a natural law, and all people know it.” Third, he draws upon Romans 2:14-15 to argue for the traditional view that the law of nature is written upon the hearts of all

⁵⁹ Ibid., 15-16.

men. Human nature itself proclaims this law, which is why Paul says that people are “laws unto themselves.” Although human beings are laws unto themselves, this does not make the law a human creation. “Thus the natural law is God’s law, proclaimed by the human heart and conscience.”⁶⁰

The effects of the fall are far-reaching into every area of life and humanity, and we are accustomed to speaking of the “noetic” effects of sin when God’s revelation is rejected or ignored. This rejection applies to both special and natural revelation. VanDrunen writes: “Wicked people will dispute various aspects of natural law (as they dispute the teaching of Scripture), of course, but Christians may be confident that all people, at some level, understand these naturally known truths to be immoral and harmful to individuals and society.”⁶¹

In his address, “The Role of Natural Law in the Westminster Confession of Faith,” VanDrunen offers suggestions for the role of natural law, providing three negative, and three positive roles. Negatively, natural law 1) aggravates the heinousness of sin, 2) ensures the judicial accountability of all before God, and 3) highlights the necessity of the ministry of the gospel. Positively, it 1) teaches the legitimate role of the powers God has ordained in society, 2) helps order worship and ecclesiastical government, and 3) provides the standard for civil government.

Reasons For Accepting Natural Law

In *A Biblical Case*, after establishing the basis for the natural law and its continuing effect after the fall, VanDrunen gives three reasons for accepting the natural law, derived from events in the Old Testament. First, he draws upon Genesis 20, which relates the story of Abraham and

⁶⁰ Ibid., 18; 19.

⁶¹ Ibid., 54.

Abimelech, to show that even those without special revelation know that there are “things that should not be done.” He points to several events in Scripture where pagans seem to be aware of a law that transcends cultures or nations. Second, he argues that the term “fear of God,” used in this same passage and elsewhere, sometimes seems to have a natural law connotation. In this passage, Abraham was surprised to find that there was a “fear of God” in this place, not necessarily meaning a worship of the true God, but rather a restraining influence that would prevent Abimelech from murdering Abraham to take his wife. “Fear of God” here may be somewhat synonymous with knowing the “things that should not be done.” He argues from this passage and others that this is another evidence of the working of natural law in the Old Testament among those outside of the covenant community. The third reason he gives for accepting natural law is that there is a “common humanity” which is recognized by those outside of the covenant community. He draws upon several passages to support this point; one example being Amos 1:3-2:3. In this passage, Amos condemns nations surrounding Israel based on their disregarding a “treaty of brotherhood,” which VanDrunen interprets to mean a knowledge of the way other people should be treated based upon their common humanity. And so he argues that when God rebukes his people, he does so on the basis of special revelation, but when he rebukes the nations (at least in this instance), he does so on the basis of natural law. Therefore, based upon these three points and the supporting biblical examples, he argues that Scripture shows that appeal to natural law is an appropriate way to interact with those people outside of the covenant community. He states that “When God’s people interact with others in the civil kingdom, therefore, they may appeal to such truths as an appropriate, common moral standard applicable to all human beings made in the image of God.”⁶²

⁶² Ibid., 49.

In a later chapter of the book, VanDrunen argues that the natural law is also used in Scripture to appeal to those in the “spiritual kingdom” or those in the covenant community. He offers several strands of argumentation to support this contention, the most lengthy being a survey of instances when God makes a comparison between something absurd in the natural order to expose absurd behavior on the part of his people. A representative example is Isaiah 1:2-3 which reads: “Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: ‘I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.’”

VanDrunen’s argument is that this bears on the question of natural law because the prophet is drawing an analogy based upon the “nature of things.” In my view, this argument is less persuasive than his previous arguments for natural law. It seems that drawing an analogy between the “nature of things” in the natural order falls more into the category of the “laws of nature” rather than natural law. The prophet makes his point regarding the absurdity of the people’s behavior by analogy to the way things are in nature, but confronting them with the absurdity of their behavior, often involving disobedience to God’s Word, does not mean that there is an appeal to natural law in view. In many of these cases, God is merely showing how foolish it is to disobey his Word. So although natural law is no doubt an important component of a believer’s knowledge of right and wrong, especially since the noetic effects of sin are being reversed by sanctification, VanDrunen’s particular line of reasoning here is less compelling.

In his article in *Modern Reformation* entitled “Natural Law and Christians in the Public Square,” VanDrunen focuses on the practical use of natural law reasoning for discourse with unbelievers. This article is written in a popular style, and in it he makes a number of assertions in brief compass. First, that natural law is authoritative and true. Second, that it is God’s

revelation. Third, that it is known by all, even if suppressed to different degrees. And finally, that most unbelievers accept at least some aspects of natural law, for instance, that murder, stealing, and lying are immoral. Following the general discussion of the applicability of natural law, he moves on to give examples of how to make practical natural law arguments. His general approach is to start with the truths that most people already know and accept, for instance, that murder is wrong, and then to build upon that truth to make specific arguments, for instance, that abortion is therefore also wrong. VanDrunen argues that such an approach can be quite effective in reaching out to our neighbors who do not know or do not accept the Bible by appealing to that moral knowledge that they already have from natural revelation.

Historical Arguments

VanDrunen also argues that this view of natural law is in continuity with the Reformed tradition. In his address entitled “The Role of Natural Law in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Reformed Orthodoxy,” he argues that natural law is integral to the system of doctrine of the Westminster Standards. He finds ten distinct doctrinal areas which are explained in part by reference to natural law. Along with the explicit references to natural law,⁶³ he labors to show that the Westminster divines essentially equated the moral law with the natural law. Thus, much of what they said about the moral law would apply to the natural law as well. So, for instance, the law which continues to bind even after the fall (WCF 19.2) refers back to the law given to Adam (WCF 19.1), which is identified elsewhere as the law written on the heart, or the natural law (WCF 4.2, WLC 17). Recognizing this identification of the natural and moral laws, VanDrunen combines them into a single law as follows: “For the Standards, clearly, the natural

⁶³ E.g., “light of nature,” “law of nature,” “works of creation.”

moral law was the basic ethical obligation binding Adam in the creation covenant.”⁶⁴ Thus, by working through the explicit language as well as that which can be deduced from cross-referencing, he argues that the references to natural law are far from mere passing remarks, and are actually an integral part of the theology and system of doctrine found in the Westminster Standards.

VanDrunen argues in various places that John Calvin certainly affirmed natural law, both in his *Institutes* and also his commentary on Romans. Furthermore, in his address on the Westminster Standards, he argues that natural law is found in the broad consensus of Reformed theology before, during, and after the Westminster Assembly. To prove this point, he surveys the teaching of a select group of Reformed thinkers: John Calvin (1509-64), Jerome Zanchi (1516-90), Johannes Althusius (1557-1638), John Owen (1616-83), Samuel Rutherford (1600?-61), and Francis Turretin (1623-87). Throughout the address, he provides contextual quotations from these Reformers, especially Zanchi, Owen, and Turretin, to support his argument. On the point made earlier that the Westminster divines equated the natural law with the moral law, he indicates that this should not be surprising because this was a standard teaching in the Reformed tradition. He writes: “Reformed theologians equated the content of the natural law with the moral law (as summarized in the Decalogue); more technical discussions distinguished the natural and moral law insofar as the former was unwritten and known through general revelation and the latter was written and known through special revelation. In Turretin’s words, they differ not in substance or principles, but in ‘mode of delivery.’” Regarding the role of natural law in civil government, he argues that section 19.4 of the Westminster Confession “makes natural law

⁶⁴ VanDrunen, “Westminster,” 11.

the standard for contemporary civil law” and that there was an “overwhelming consensus in early Reformed theology that natural law was the standard for civil government.”⁶⁵

Based upon the strong presence of natural law found both in the confessional standards for Presbyterians worldwide and the consensus of major Reformed thinkers from the early Reformation through the period of the Westminster Assembly, VanDrunen argues that it is untenable to dismiss the idea of natural law as something foreign to Reformed theology. He presents a challenge to develop a greater appreciation for the teaching on natural law found in our Reformed theological and confessional heritage.

Recognition of Limitations

Despite his enthusiasm for recovering the natural law in Reformed thinking, VanDrunen recognizes and points out some of the difficulties attached to it. For instance, he recognizes that we cannot merely appeal to what feels “natural” because many of our natural feelings are sinful. Rather than appealing to what feels “natural,” an approach which some natural law proponents have used in the past, we should appeal to things which Scripture tells us that all people already know, such as the list of things enumerated in Romans 1:29-32.

He also recognizes that although carefully constructed natural law arguments “have a certain chance for effectiveness,” they will sometimes be rejected. He says, “I do not believe that there is any foolproof way of making persuasive natural law arguments.” He later adds that “Christians certainly should not be over-confident in their appeals to natural law. Even when we make good natural law arguments, unbelievers will often reject them (as they reject arguments from Scripture).” He also seems quite aware of the difficulty in making strong natural law

⁶⁵ Ibid., 10; 17; 19.

arguments, even though we know from Scripture that all men have this moral knowledge. He writes: “Christians may be confident that appealing to people’s natural knowledge of these things is valid and legitimate, even when unbelievers deny these truths and when believers themselves do not know exactly how to turn such appeals into good arguments.”⁶⁶ In other words, our inability to formulate a good argument, or the fact that our arguments may be rejected, does not in itself invalidate the legitimacy of appealing to the natural law.

The Two Kingdom Approach

VanDrunen finds it helpful to consider natural law in the context of the two kingdoms, and views the two kingdom approach as “proper background for the role of natural law in the present day.”⁶⁷ The two kingdom view is usually associated with Martin Luther. Simply stated, the two kingdom view is that while God rules over all things, there are two different realms (“kingdoms”) over which he rules in different ways. According to Luther, the kingdom of God’s “left hand” is the civil kingdom, over which he rules as creator and sustainer to provide general equity and justice for civil and political life. The kingdom of God’s “right hand” is the spiritual kingdom over which he also rules as redeemer and which concerns spiritual or heavenly realities. According to this view, Christians are dual citizens, living and moving in both the civil and spiritual kingdoms which overlap, but have different purposes and ends. VanDrunen labors to show that this view was not unique to Luther, but that Calvin also made use of this distinction, with some differences, using the terms “civil” and “spiritual” kingdoms. He also finds “seeds” of this view in earlier Christian writers.⁶⁸ He presents a biblical argument for this view in which he

⁶⁶ VanDrunen, “Natural Law and Christians.”

⁶⁷ VanDrunen, *Biblical Case*, 23.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 24-26.

places it “in the context of the historical development of God’s dealing with his world by way of a series of covenants.”⁶⁹ He states that this approach gives his argument a distinctive shape when compared to the older Reformation arguments. He writes that the civil kingdom is concerned with temporal and common affairs that are the common enterprise of all human beings, while the spiritual kingdom concerns the more narrow religious affairs, especially the way of salvation from sin.⁷⁰ In terms of covenantal structure, he sees the Noahic covenant, a “covenant of common grace,” as exemplifying the covenantal relationship of the civil kingdom. This covenant was made with all people, indeed even all creatures, and concerned temporal and cultural affairs. The covenantal context for the spiritual kingdom is the Abrahamic covenant, which was made with Abraham as a representative for a particular people. This covenant was religious in nature, concerning redemptive affairs.

The two kingdoms view has generated much debate and discussion within the Reformed community and that debate is beyond the scope of this present study. But for our purposes, it is important to evaluate how influential this view is in shaping VanDrunen’s advocacy of natural law. Although he spends some time developing his two kingdom view to provide context for his discussion of natural law, his advocacy of natural law does not seem dependent upon this. It seems in general that the arguments he is making regarding the validity of natural law are equally valid if we merely retain the distinction between common and special grace, all under God’s sovereign lordship. In other words, it does not seem necessary to speak of two “kingdoms” in order to accept the view that natural law is still useful in a fallen world in the public square because of the continuing influence of common grace. However, it does seem that his two kingdom view influences his view of how Scripture applies to unbelievers in the civil kingdom.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 26.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 28.

It may be that this sharp distinction, at least in part, leads him to the conclusion that Scripture has a very limited role for providing moral guidance in the civil kingdom.

The Role of Scripture

VanDrunen argues against a “Scripture-only” approach to civil, political, and ethical discussions in the public square. He believes that setting aside the natural law and focusing solely on Scripture is “not a legitimate option,” even though Scripture is given to remedy the suppression of natural revelation and announce the way of salvation.⁷¹ He clearly affirms that special biblical revelation is absolutely necessary for knowing the way of salvation in Christ.⁷² But this fact does not mean that natural law has no usefulness. It seems, then, that VanDrunen is arguing that Scripture is clearly necessary for knowing the way of salvation, but it is not necessary in the same way for knowing what is right and wrong, because this knowledge can be known through natural law. Now, he does state that what he says about natural law “should not be taken to suggest that natural law provides *exhaustive* moral guidance. It is probably best to say that natural law provides a general framework in which the moral life should be lived, but that royal image-bearers have a significant degree of freedom within that framework to exercise dominion over the earth in ways appropriate in different contexts.”⁷³

Although VanDrunen clearly states that supernatural divine revelation “binds morally the whole of the human race,” he argues that Scripture is written for the covenant people, and so “there are good reasons to suggest that Scripture, strictly speaking, is not meant to serve as the

⁷¹ Ibid., 34-35.

⁷² Ibid., 15.

⁷³ Ibid., 14.

moral standard for the civil kingdom.”⁷⁴ The moral imperatives, including the Ten Commandments, that we find in Scripture are intended for God’s covenant people, and are based upon the “indicative-imperative” structure. The indicatives of special grace do not apply to those outside of the covenant community, and therefore, the imperatives do not strictly apply, although many may apply due to their common nature. Natural law does apply to all people, because it is a common law that applies to the common community of humanity. Therefore, “The moral instruction given in Scripture cannot be taken simply as the moral standard for the world at large,” because it is lifted from the context that grounds it. Furthermore, “Christians cannot rightly appeal to the moral lifestyle set forth in Scripture as directly applicable to non-Christians.” And so, “Given its character, therefore, Scripture is not given as a common moral standard that provides ethical imperatives to all people regardless of their religious standing. . . . In the civil kingdom, where God’s people intermix with people outside their religious kingdom for common cultural purposes, natural law rather than special divine revelation serves as the basis for their moral reasoning.”⁷⁵

VanDrunen provides an excellent summary of his view of the relation of Scripture and natural revelation in the context of discussions in the public square on bioethical issues. His burden is to show that meaningful ethical discussions can still exist with those in the culture who do not know or accept Scripture as a moral authority. He writes:

Christians do not share basic presuppositions about God and this world with non-Christians (as a subjective matter), but God’s natural revelation about himself and his world is common to them both (as an objective matter). . . . While the ethics of Scripture specifically addresses people *as Christians*, those who have died and been raised with Christ, the moral law revealed in nature addresses all people *as human beings*. That is, Scripture commands obedience as a response to the redemption experienced in Christ while the moral law of nature places obligations upon all people based on their common

⁷⁴ Ibid., 1; 38.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 39; 40; 53.

created humanity. Natural revelation therefore provides an appropriate means for Christians to converse with non-Christians in the bioethics of the broader world.”⁷⁶

Summary

From this general survey of VanDrunen’s writings on natural law, we can see that he carefully avoids the typical objections raised against natural law which he enumerated earlier. He locates the moral authority behind the natural law in God’s own person and revelation, following the view of earlier Reformers that the moral law and natural law are identical in content, although they differ in the mode of delivery. Appeals to natural law, rightly understood, should therefore never lead to the conclusion of human autonomy. He takes the impact of the fall seriously, and argues that Scripture teaches the continuing relevance of natural law after the fall, and that all mankind still retains a knowledge of right and wrong, despite their fallenness. And he retains a high regard for the authority of Scripture, drawing his arguments for the continuing relevance of natural law from Scripture itself.

It may be helpful to briefly summarize his major emphases and concerns before moving on to the opposing view. VanDrunen argues that Scripture itself teaches that it is appropriate to appeal to natural law to those outside of the covenant community, and that the broad Reformed tradition, especially exemplified by John Calvin and the Westminster Standards, fully affirmed a robust doctrine of natural law. The Bible teaches that natural law is known by all people after the fall, and that this moral knowledge is virtually comprehensive. Even though fallen and wicked people may dispute the natural moral knowledge they have, just as they dispute the Scriptures, we can have confidence that appealing to this moral knowledge will often be effective in our moral argumentation. He argues that Scripture is intended for the covenant community and

⁷⁶ VanDrunen, *Bioethics*, 35-36.

should not be appealed to as a moral standard for unbelievers because they do not share the indicative/imperative experience of covenant members. Instead, natural law is the basis of moral reasoning in the civil kingdom, and therefore should serve as the basis for civil government, rather than Scripture. Because of this, we should not require appeal to Scripture as the basis for moral discussions we have with our neighbors, and we should be confident that our appeals to natural revelation will resonate in their consciences. For all of these reasons, Christians ought to embrace this doctrine of natural law as a biblical teaching and of great significance in a fallen world.

CHAPTER 5

MODERN REFORMED CRITICISM

Background

As noted earlier, there is more contemporary literature written from a Reformed perspective against natural law than in favor of it, so the challenge is to narrow the material down to the most significant and compelling critiques. My approach here will be to briefly mention some important authors who have contributed in this field, and then to more narrowly focus attention on the writings of John Frame, whom I consider an excellent representative of the natural law critics because of his particularly thoughtful approach to the subject and the overall balance of his critique. Prior to examining his approach in detail, I would like to mention three other authors of significance: Karl Barth, Cornelius Van Til, and Nelson Kloosterman.

Karl Barth is not influential in contemporary Reformed theology, but is an important historical figure because of his rhetorical victory over Emil Brunner in a heated exchange over natural law in 1934. Barth's famous reply to Brunner entitled "Nein!" was an important factor in the decline of natural law theory in protestant theology in the twentieth century.⁷⁷ Cornelius Van Til remains influential in conservative Reformed and Presbyterian traditions, particularly in the area of epistemology and apologetics. According to John Frame, Van Til "saw 'natural law' as a Roman Catholic theory in which culture and politics are governed by autonomous human reason rather than by Scripture. In that view, Scripture is limited to the realm of the 'spiritual,' or

⁷⁷ See, for instance, Grabill, chapter 1, and Schreiner, 52-53.

‘redemption,’ or ‘the church.’”⁷⁸ Van Til drew sharp distinctions between believing and unbelieving worldviews, and questioned whether there was any common ground between the two positions. Natural law, as a standard known through God’s common grace, could be considered as common ground, and so it is not surprising that Van Til may have been skeptical of natural law approaches. Van Til’s significance for our purposes here is his important influence on John Frame.

Nelson Kloosterman is a contemporary author significant to this study because he has offered criticisms of David VanDrunen’s approach to natural law in several places, most notably in his previously cited review of *A Biblical Case For Natural Law* in *Ordained Servant*. He does not believe the passages in Romans support a natural law position, and I have interacted with his interpretation of these passages in chapter 2. Perhaps his most substantial criticism of VanDrunen’s approach is that natural law arguments ultimately fall into either a sociological fallacy, or a naturalistic fallacy. He is critical of VanDrunen’s argument against abortion on both of these grounds. The sociological fallacy is that something derives normative status because of a social consensus, and the naturalistic fallacy is an error that derives an ought from what is. These are important criticisms of natural law arguments which will be further analyzed later in this paper.

John Frame

Introduction

John Frame is perhaps the most well known and respected Reformed theologian writing in opposition to natural law today. He is currently professor of systematic theology and

⁷⁸ John Frame, “Reflections of a Lifetime Theologian: An Extended Interview with John M. Frame, Part I,” *Christian Culture* (April 2008), 5.

apologetics at Reformed Theological Seminary, and has produced many significant writings in the area of theology and apologetics. Frame identifies himself as a “Kuyperian” because he believes that Scripture should be brought to bear on all of life, including all matters of culture and politics. He also identifies himself as a follower of Cornelius Van Til and remains one of the foremost defenders of Van Til’s epistemology today. His style of critique is typically balanced and winsome, and he takes all opposing views seriously.

His writings that are most relevant to the topic of natural law include his latest volume on ethics entitled *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, his earlier book, *Medical Ethics*,⁷⁹ and two articles entitled “In Defense of Christian Activism,”⁸⁰ and “Is Natural Revelation Sufficient to Govern Culture?”⁸¹ He also recently posted a review of VanDrunen’s book *A Biblical Case for Natural Law* on his website.⁸² The content of this review is similar to his other works, but it is written with a more polemical tone. In *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, Frame’s main discussion focuses on the work of J. Budziszewski, who was mentioned earlier as an important non-Reformed proponent of natural law. Frame indicates his respect for Budziszewski’s apologetical and ethical writings, because he tends to avoid many of the traditional Roman Catholic errors of which Van Til was so critical. Some of the following discussion, therefore, draws upon Frame’s analysis of Budziszewski’s writings.

Summary of His View

Frame defines natural law as a law that is “understood to be a moral order, found in

⁷⁹ John Frame, *Medical Ethics* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988).

⁸⁰ John Frame, “In Defense of Christian Activism,” In *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, Appendix E (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008).

⁸¹ John Frame, “Is Natural Revelation Sufficient to Govern Culture?” In *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, Appendix F (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2008).

⁸² John Frame, “Review of David Van Drunen, *A Biblical Case for Natural Law*,” 2010, 12 Jan. 2010 <http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/2010VanDrunen.htm>.

nature and in man himself. It is accessible through reason and conscience.”⁸³ Because of his substantial interaction with Budziszewski, he also references Budziszewski’s definition as “moral principles that are both right for everybody and knowable to everybody by the ordinary exercise of human reason.”⁸⁴ Regarding the content of natural revelation, he writes: “Romans 1 does say that God clearly reveals his ethical standards in natural revelation.”⁸⁵ Although Frame recognizes a positive role for natural law, most of his analysis is critical of natural law approaches. His main concern seems to be to show that any ethic based upon natural law is an insufficient ethic, because any natural law teaching is itself dependent upon Scripture for its authority. Furthermore, fallen man’s suppression of God’s natural revelation requires special grace, which comes through the special revelation of Scripture. Therefore, for both of these reasons, Scripture is required, rendering natural revelation insufficient by itself, and of limited value. Prior to delving into his analysis at specific points, we begin with an important statement that well summarizes his overall position. He writes:

It is difficult to understand how best to coordinate depravity with common grace. But it is right to say that depravity is never so extreme that it entirely blots out God’s law from the unbeliever’s consciousness. Romans 1 teaches that the unbeliever knows it well enough that when he rebels against it, it leaves him without excuse (Rom. 1:20,32). So I would say that the non-Christian both knows and suppresses the truth, and his knowledge of the truth may sometimes be conscious. It is not wrong, therefore, to say that he is aware of God’s moral standards through general revelation. Here I agree with Budziszewski.

But the rather precarious status of general revelation in the nonbeliever’s consciousness calls in question the likelihood of that revelation producing a stable moral consensus in modern culture sufficient to govern nations.⁸⁶

It seems that Frame is in general agreement with the proponents of natural law regarding fallen man’s continuing knowledge of God’s moral standards. But he refers here to one of his

⁸³ Frame, *Christian Life*, 243.

⁸⁴ Jay Budziszewski, *Written on the Heart: The Case For Natural Law* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1997), 109.

⁸⁵ Frame, “Is Natural Revelation Sufficient,” 954.

⁸⁶ Frame, *Christian Life*, 244.

main concerns, that of *sufficiency*. He does not deny that natural law may be useful, but does believe that it is insufficient, in this case, to “govern nations.” He identifies three major areas where he disagrees with David VanDrunen: “Our disagreements concern the relation of natural law to Scripture, the two-kingdoms doctrine, and the function of natural law within a biblical ethical epistemology.”⁸⁷ We will examine each of these differences here and in the later analysis.

Historical Considerations

We have seen that VanDrunen interacted with the Reformed tradition in several places, arguing that the tradition supports his view of natural law. Frame, on the other hand, does not provide any substantial analysis of the Reformed tradition, preferring instead to focus upon Scripture. He writes, “I think, however, that in this matter and others, writers have paid too much attention to the history of theology and too little attention to the teachings of Scripture itself.”⁸⁸ Indeed, this is his standard approach to theology: to focus on biblical interpretation without being overly constrained by the historical tradition. But he does venture to say that he is skeptical about whether Luther and Calvin truly accepted natural law approaches, with the caveat that he has not done much historical work on this aspect of their thought.⁸⁹

One very important factor in Frame’s discussion of natural law is the underlying theological difference between Frame and some Reformed proponents in the relation of the church to the secular culture. Frame is critical of the modern proponents of natural law at Westminster Seminary California, including Michael Horton and David VanDrunen, because they do not follow Van Til. He writes, “they don’t know his work, don’t use it, and in this regard

⁸⁷ Frame, “Review,” 1.

⁸⁸ Frame, “Reflections,” 5.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

[natural law] contradict one of his major emphases.”⁹⁰ He believes one major factor in their thinking to be the influence of Meredith Kline, and his sharp distinction between sacred and secular, and special and common grace. He writes critically of this aspect of Kline’s teaching in several places, saying that “He limited Scripture to one realm and left the other to natural law.”⁹¹ He is strongly opposed to the two kingdom model and has criticized it in many places.⁹² He sees the two kingdom distinction as an error which has contributed to the resurgence of interest in natural law, at least in the case of VanDrunen and Horton. It is not my purpose here to analyze the relation of church and state or Christ and culture, and so we will not examine his view of culture in detail, but the influence of his thinking on these issues will be apparent in his analysis of the relation of Scripture to natural law, particularly as it applies to civil government and the obligations of unbelievers.

Positive Statements on Natural Law

Although Frame is generally skeptical about natural law approaches, he does not rule out the possibility of appealing to natural law in some cases. He mentions the fact that Paul appealed to natural revelation in Acts 14:15-17 and 17:22-31, concluding that natural revelation is “of some use” and is “important, certainly, in applying the principles of Scripture.”⁹³ This seems to be the main use he sees for natural revelation. He writes, “God designed us to gain moral knowledge, not by either supernatural or natural revelation alone, but by an organic combination of the two, in which by reason and conscience we apply God’s supernatural revelation to our

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² This criticism is mentioned in nearly all of Frame’s works listed in the Bibliography.

⁹³ Frame, “Is Natural Revelation Sufficient,” 955-956.

lives.”⁹⁴ So, although moral knowledge comes as an organic combination, it is to the end of applying supernatural revelation. He says that arguments from natural revelation may be persuasive to some non-Christians because they cannot fully suppress that moral knowledge they do have.⁹⁵ And he believes that “there may be pragmatic reasons at times for Christians to defend their views of government by reference to nature, rather than to Scripture.” Therefore, he concludes that natural law can be “an important apologetic tool.”⁹⁶

Despite these somewhat positive statements about natural law, Frame believes it is very difficult to make a cogent argument based upon natural revelation alone. He thinks it likely that natural revelation works in an “intuitive” manner in the human consciousness, and therefore, that it is difficult to appeal to this intuitive knowledge in the form of an argument, although he doesn’t entirely rule out the possibility.⁹⁷ For Christians who take their standards from the Bible, he believes that it is better to be up-front that the starting point is Scripture, rather than natural revelation. He recognizes that many nonbelievers will not accept Scripture as authoritative and he agrees that we should not enter the “public arena slinging Bible verses in every direction.”⁹⁸ But he believes that nonbelievers “may at least respect an argument that is self-conscious about its epistemological and metaphysical presuppositions.”⁹⁹

Sola Scriptura and Sufficiency

We mentioned earlier that Frame considers himself Kuyperian in his approach to culture. Christ is Lord over every area of human activity, and therefore, his Word governs all of human

⁹⁴ Frame, “Review,” 2.

⁹⁵ Frame, “Is Natural Revelation Sufficient,” 954.

⁹⁶ Frame, *Christian Life*, 602; 248.

⁹⁷ Frame, “Is Natural Revelation Sufficient,” 954.

⁹⁸ Frame, “Reflections,” 5.

⁹⁹ Frame, “Is Natural Revelation Sufficient,” 954.

life and thinking. He states that there is “no biblical basis for suggesting that any sphere of human activity is not to be governed by God’s full revelation, or that any human project should not acknowledge God.”¹⁰⁰ By “full revelation,” Frame primarily means Scripture, against those who would try to argue from natural revelation alone. He defines theology as “the application of the Word to all areas of life,”¹⁰¹ and his Scripture-only (*sola scriptura*) approach to theology and life is a prominent feature in all of his writing. He writes: “I urge Christians to bring the standards of the Word of God to bear on matters of culture and politics, as well as matters that are more narrowly theological. . . . In general society as well as in the church, Christians should settle for nothing less than the comprehensive lordship of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰² And because Scripture, then, is our epistemological starting point, and the final standard for all moral reasoning, Frame believes it should have the primary position in our ethical discussions, even with nonbelievers in the public square. He writes: “God’s entire revelation gives us the only objective truth available in any area of human life or thought. There is no room for autonomous human thought in any realm of life; such thought will inevitably fail. We need to take our standards from Scripture. And if it helps occasionally to actually quote Scripture, we should be unashamed to do that.”¹⁰³

And so, given Frame’s *sola scriptura* approach to all of life, including discussions with nonbelievers in the public square, it is not surprising that he is skeptical of approaches that appeal to natural revelation alone. He believes that “natural-law arguments ultimately depend on arguments from Scripture,” and therefore, “there is no such thing as a natural-law argument apart

¹⁰⁰ Frame, “Christian Activism,” 949.

¹⁰¹ Frame, *Christian Life*, 9.

¹⁰² Frame, “Christian Activism,” 950.

¹⁰³ Frame, “Reflections,” 5.

from Scripture.”¹⁰⁴ We will briefly consider two specific areas where he brings Scripture to bear on topics important to the natural law discussion: suppression of natural revelation and civil government.

Suppression of Natural Revelation

One of the areas of ongoing debate within the Reformed community is how to best coordinate fallen mankind’s knowledge of the truth through natural revelation with his suppression of that truth, or as Frame put it earlier, how best to coordinate depravity with common grace. One factor in Frame’s Scripture-only approach is that the distortion of natural revelation can only be removed by saving grace, which comes to us through the gospel, and the message of Scripture. Therefore, Scripture is required for fallen man to read natural revelation correctly.¹⁰⁵ This brings to mind John Calvin’s analogy of Scripture as “spectacles” which help fallen man to see natural revelation clearly, which Frame refers to in his argument. He also writes, “Since natural revelation does not bring people to salvation, it cannot prevent its own distortion in the human heart.”¹⁰⁶ It seems that the implication here is that Scripture, in conjunction with saving grace, *can* prevent its own distortion in the human heart, and therefore does not suffer from the same limitation as natural revelation.

Frame summarizes his position as follows: “So, although nonbelievers have a certain knowledge of God apart from Scripture, which challenges them even though they repress it . . . , that is not a desirable situation. It would be far better if they came to know God through the gospel and then learned to look at every fact in the world through the ‘spectacles’ of

¹⁰⁴ Frame, *Christian Life*, 245.

¹⁰⁵ See *Christian Life*, 246, and “Christian Activism,” 949.

¹⁰⁶ Frame, “Is Natural Revelation Sufficient,” 952-953.

Scripture.”¹⁰⁷ This conclusion follows naturally from his overall view of the lordship of Christ expressed in the statement we saw earlier: “In general society as well as in the church, Christians should settle for nothing less than the comprehensive lordship of Jesus Christ.” Therefore, one significant factor in Frame’s Scripture-only approach seems to be the goal of the comprehensive lordship of Jesus Christ, rather than merely a measure of civil justice, or ethical persuasion on a specific issue.

Insufficiency of Natural Revelation for Civil Government

Following his discussion of man’s suppression of general revelation, Frame asks the rhetorical question: “Does that not make it impossible to base an ethic on general revelation alone?”¹⁰⁸ We saw earlier that his answer to this question is that it is unlikely that general revelation can produce “a stable moral consensus in modern culture sufficient to govern nations.” But in his article, “Is Natural Revelation Sufficient,” he strongly argues that it is more than *unlikely*, and in fact is actually *impossible*, because natural revelation is insufficient to govern culture.

His argument for this position can be grouped under three major points. First, natural revelation is insufficient as a standard because it is distorted by fallen humanity. This distortion makes it impossible for natural revelation to provide a stable moral consensus for a society, as we have seen previously. Second, all human governments are responsible to obey God’s written revelation. He writes that “God has never authorized any social institutions or activities to govern themselves without the use of his spoken and written words.”¹⁰⁹ And, “Scripture never

¹⁰⁷ Frame, *Christian Life*, 246.

¹⁰⁸ Frame, *Christian Life*, 243.

¹⁰⁹ Frame, “Is Natural Revelation Sufficient,” 953.

suggests that pagan governments are not responsible to God's special revelation."¹¹⁰ In support of this claim, he cites the fact that the Old Testament prophets condemned pagan nations for not obeying special revelation, for instance, in Isaiah 10-24. Third and finally, natural revelation is insufficient for the desired *end*. According to Frame, the end is to bring all of culture under the lordship of Jesus Christ in a political sense. Jesus is Lord of everything, including politics. Bringing everything into submission to Christ requires saving grace to remove the suppression of truth, and this saving grace comes through the gospel and Scriptures. He writes, "The political goal of biblical Christianity is a civil state that acknowledges him for who he is. Every institution of human culture, as well as every individual human being, is called to pay homage to King Jesus."¹¹¹ And therefore, if the civil and political goal is to bring everyone into submission to Christ, natural revelation is insufficient for this goal because it does not communicate the gospel. His conclusion to this argument is "that Christian reasoning about ethics, whether public or private, should never be based on natural revelation alone."¹¹² At a minimum therefore, Scripture should not be excluded from determining civil law. As far as I can tell, Frame never makes the claim that Scripture should be the *sole* standard for civil government. But at the very least, it should be used in conjunction with natural law to determine standards for civil government. And the general trajectory of Frame's argument seems to suggest that Scripture should in fact have the primacy in determining standards for civil government.

¹¹⁰ Frame, "Christian Activism," 949; see also "Is Natural Revelation Sufficient," 953.

¹¹¹ Frame, *Christian Life*, 249.

¹¹² Frame, "Is Natural Revelation Sufficient," 955.

Approach to Ethics

We have seen that Frame does not believe that natural revelation alone should be the basis of ethical discussions, meaning that Scripture must be brought to bear on all ethical arguments, whether public or private. According to Frame, reasoning according to natural revelation alone leads “almost inevitably” to human rational autonomy.¹¹³ In order to avoid this error, a distinctly Christian approach is required, which uses Scripture as the basis for ethical reasoning. He argues that it is difficult to construct cogent ethical arguments from natural revelation, in part because it is likely that knowledge of natural revelation is intuitive.¹¹⁴ He believes that because of the intuitive nature of this knowledge, it is difficult to argue for standards of judgment from natural revelation alone, and yet these standards are required for persuasive ethical argumentation. Therefore it is better to acknowledge up front that all of our standards come from Scripture, and to be honest that this is a presupposition of our arguments.

Frame’s argument for using Scripture for all ethical decisions extends even to nonbelievers, and he discusses some implications of this approach in his book, *Medical Ethics*. One implication is that the church should have a role that is recognized by the medical and legal establishments because it can help to bring biblical standards to bear, particularly to help those who are not “competent.”¹¹⁵ This concept of “competence” should be used to evaluate whether a person is legitimately qualified to make ethical decisions. How are we to judge whether someone is competent? Frame believes the biblical idea of competence means conforming to God’s will, meaning that if one deviates from a Scriptural ethical principle, they have rendered themselves incompetent. One implication of this approach is that if a person has a false view of God (e.g., a

¹¹³ Frame, “Is Natural Revelation Sufficient,” 955.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 954.

¹¹⁵ Frame, *Medical*, 39.

Jehovah's Witness) that influences an ethical decision, they should be judged incompetent to make such a decision, and the physician should override that decision if necessary, supported by the church and the civil courts.¹¹⁶ In this approach it would seem that the civil court would have to have the same standards of competence as the church.

One major critique that Frame brings against natural law ethical arguments is that they are often guilty of the "naturalistic fallacy," that is, arguing from "is" to "ought." Frame believes the Roman Catholic argument against contraception, and natural law arguments against abortion are both guilty of the naturalistic fallacy.¹¹⁷ In order to avoid these naturalistic fallacies, "natural-law arguments often cry out for scriptural supplementation." In his earlier discussion he implies that this fallacy may be avoided with thoughtful natural law arguments, but he later excludes this possibility, saying that "one cannot argue moral conclusions from natural law apart from Scripture, without committing the naturalistic fallacy."¹¹⁸ Although it may be difficult to reconcile his seemingly contradictory statements on whether it is actually possible to avoid the naturalistic fallacy, I conclude that he finds it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to avoid this error when arguing from natural law alone.

Summary

We have seen in this brief survey that John Frame believes that Scripture should be the primary standard for civil government and both public and private ethical discussions. God's revelation in Scripture provides our epistemological and metaphysical starting point, and therefore, we should be clear from the outset that this is our standard for all of life and reasoning.

¹¹⁶ See his discussion of blood transfusions, *Medical*, 40.

¹¹⁷ See, for instance, *Christian Life*, 247-248, and "Is Natural Revelation Sufficient," 954.

¹¹⁸ Frame, *Christian Life*, 248; 783.

The goal is nothing less than to bring everything into submission to the lordship of Christ, transforming the culture by the gospel, found in the special revelation of Scripture. Bringing everything into submission to Christ's lordship ultimately means that fallen man's suppression of the truth must be overcome, and this can only be accomplished through saving grace, which comes through the Scriptures. Because Scripture is required to accomplish these goals, natural revelation alone does not provide a sufficient ethical standard for public life and discussion.

Frame believes that natural law arguments can be useful in some discussions to apply the principles found in Scripture, and therefore, it is not wrong to use them in certain situations. But such arguments have significant limitations, and ultimately, since they depend upon Scripture, it would be better to use Scripture. In order to avoid human rational autonomy, our approach to public ethical discussion should be distinctively Christian, and rely upon the Scriptures as the starting point. This approach will also ensure that naturalistic fallacies are avoided, an error found in most, if not all, natural law arguments. He summarizes by saying, "I conclude, then, that natural law is an important apologetic tool, but it does not provide ethical norms in addition to those in Scripture. And those who use natural-law arguments need to beware of naturalistic fallacies."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Frame, *Christian Life*, 248.

CHAPTER 6

EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Introduction

Having surveyed the views of David VanDrunen and John Frame on natural law theory in a general overview, we turn now to an analysis of natural law under two broad categories. The present chapter will focus on epistemological considerations, and the following chapter will focus on the relation of natural law to Scripture. These two categories provide a convenient method of partitioning the analysis, but we will find a good deal of overlap between them. This chapter will consider both Scripture and natural law as normative revelation, and then evaluate the effect of the fall on the interpretation of this revelation.

Natural Law and Scripture as Revelation

It is not uncommon in writings on natural law to find statements which contrast “natural” with “revealed” law, as if they are mutually exclusive. For instance, we saw earlier how Francis Beattie used these two terms in contrast: “The duty of the worship of God has both a natural and a revealed basis and sanction.” The use of such language seems to exclude natural law from revelation, the law being *either* natural *or* revealed. But the Bible clearly teaches that the knowledge of natural law comes through natural *revelation* (Rom. 1:19-20, 2:14-15). And so, consistent with the definitions given earlier, it is better to contrast natural with supernatural, so

that natural law is then revealed by God through natural revelation, while God's written Word is revealed through special revelation. The natural law is revealed in the created order of nature, and in humanity itself, mankind bearing the image of God, and possessing moral knowledge operating through the conscience. Both categories of the law are revealed by God and derive their authority from him; in fact, they are different revelations of the single unified divine law which has its basis in God's own character.

In his critique of VanDrunen's book, *A Biblical Case For Natural Law*, Frame presents an interesting challenge to the traditional understanding that natural law is known entirely apart from special revelation. He suggests that much of what we call "natural law" may in fact be oral tradition passed down through the generations to all nations that had its source in creation ordinances (special revelation), and he criticizes VanDrunen for not addressing this possibility.¹²⁰ Although this suggestion is intriguing, I believe the burden is on Frame to show how this transmission actually occurred, to distinguish which parts are known through special rather than natural revelation, and how it is that such ethical knowledge is universal. I doubt that this could actually be demonstrated. Furthermore, this criticism is hardly fair, because VanDrunen is merely defending the traditional and biblical view of natural law as moral knowledge gained through natural revelation. In this case, as in several others mentioned in Frame's review, VanDrunen should not be faulted for not covering the particular questions that Frame wants answered. Although Frame raises the possibility that some of what we call natural law may have derived from special revelation, he affirms that man does have moral knowledge because God has revealed it in nature. He agrees that some ethical knowledge may be innate and some can be

¹²⁰ Frame, "Review," 9.

gained from creation.¹²¹ And so, Reformed proponents and critics agree that both natural law and Scripture have their source in God and are revealed by him.¹²²

Natural Law and Scripture as Moral Law

We have seen that both natural moral knowledge and the moral commands found in Scripture are *revelation*, and therefore, they both have a normative character and function. That is, just as Scripture gives us moral law, the knowledge that we have through natural revelation provides ethical *standards*, and is therefore also moral law, and binding on mankind. David VanDrunen states that “Reformed theologians were very clear that the natural law was just as much the law of God as the law revealed in Scripture.” He quotes Samuel Rutherford’s opening section of *Lex Rex*: “What is warranted by the direction of nature’s light is warranted by the law of nature, and consequently by a divine law; for who can deny the law of nature to be a divine law?”¹²³

How then, does this natural law relate to the divine commands given in Scripture? John Frame puts it this way: “There is no inconsistency between what God commands, through this natural knowledge and what he commands us in Scripture. God’s moral standards are one, even though they come through two media.”¹²⁴ VanDrunen agrees, saying: “The natural law is unwritten while the moral law is supernaturally revealed and recorded in Scripture; their basic moral content, however, is the same.”¹²⁵ He argues that this is the historical Reformed understanding of the relationship. He writes, “Reformed theologians equated the content of the

¹²¹ Ibid., 10.

¹²² See also Frame, “Is Natural Revelation Sufficient,” 954, VanDrunen, *Biblical Case*, 7,14, and “Natural Law and Christians.”

¹²³ VanDrunen, “Westminster,” 17-18.

¹²⁴ Frame, *Christian Life*, 872.

¹²⁵ VanDrunen, “Westminster,” 6.

natural law with the moral law (as summarized in the Decalogue); more technical discussions distinguished the natural and moral laws insofar as the former was unwritten and known through general revelation and the latter was written and known through special revelation. In Turretin's words, they differ not in substance or principles, but in 'mode of delivery.'"¹²⁶ We saw earlier that this was the view of the Westminster divines, and that because the Ten Commandments are a summary of the moral law, they are therefore also a summary of the natural law.

In the preceding discussion, "moral law" is used for convenience to refer to the written law found in Scripture, in contrast to the natural law found in general revelation. This language may be somewhat misleading, however, because the natural law also provides ethical standards, and is therefore, strictly speaking, also moral law. It may be better to state the relationship as follows: There is only one law of God, which reflects his character and defines the obligations of the creature to the Creator. This law can be properly called "moral law" because it morally binds all humanity to obedience. This single, unified moral law has been revealed in different ways (Turretin's "mode of delivery" and Frame's "two media"). It is found through natural revelation in nature itself by God's works of creation and providence, and in human beings as made in God's image. It is also found through supernatural revelation, being written down in the Scriptures, and expressed in summary form in the Decalogue. Because of the nature of written revelation, it is more explicit, clear, and comprehensive than what is known through natural revelation, but the content of the law delivered through the two "media" is substantively the same. The difference in scope and clarity between the two media will be explored further in the next chapter.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 10.

Natural Law After the Fall

Before the fall, the law of God, or natural law, written on the heart of Adam and Eve was an important source of ethical knowledge of God and their duty to him. In their state of obedience, it was no doubt a delight to them, and, as G. I. Williamson says, “a positive power which incited love of God and of good.”¹²⁷ The fall into sin did not change the law, but it did change man’s relationship to the law. Instead of being a delight and a way of life, it became a burden and a source of condemnation. Many natural law thinkers throughout history have not properly understood the extent and implications of the fall. This failure has led to defective theories of natural law that tend towards an unwarranted human autonomy. These theories have been rightly criticized and rejected by both evangelical and Reformed writers.

The Reformed doctrine of total depravity teaches that man’s fall into sin affected every aspect of his being, including his body, mind, will, and relationship to God and his truth. There is no area of his life that is unaffected by the fall. One of the ways this works itself out is that man does not read God’s revelation correctly. He is blinded to spiritual truths (1 Cor. 1:14), and suppresses the truth about God (Rom. 1:18). Because of the devastating effects of the fall on man’s abilities, some have argued that natural law is no longer effective, and therefore we cannot reliably appeal to natural law truths because of man’s fallen position. But although man certainly does twist and distort the knowledge he has through either natural or special revelation, Paul clearly teaches that fallen man retains a knowledge of God, his duties, and an awareness of God’s wrath against sin. Romans 1:32 states: “Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.” Fallen man clearly *knows* God’s law, but willfully chooses to

¹²⁷ G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 137.

disobey it. The law of life has now become a law of condemnation and death for fallen mankind. Williamson summarizes this change in the role of natural revelation: “Natural revelation not only declares the attributes of God (as it did from the beginning), but also it reveals the wrath of God against all unrighteousness and ungodliness of men (about which it did not previously need to testify, for the simple reason that there was then no unrighteousness or ungodliness of men).”¹²⁸ After the fall, natural revelation took on a new role: that of condemnation. The later written revelation of Scripture also fills this same role of exposing sinfulness and liability to God’s wrath.

Therefore, it is clear from Scripture that man retains a knowledge of God, his duty, and moral knowledge of right and wrong, despite the effects of sin. Despite fallen man’s attempt to throw off the knowledge of God’s law, it still presses in on him from natural revelation, including that moral sense which comes from being made in God’s image and operates through the conscience. Williamson writes: “Man’s inherent sense of right and wrong is due to the fact that he cannot escape the claims of the law of God.”¹²⁹ Reformed proponents and critics of natural law seem to be agreed on this point. John Frame agrees with VanDrunen that fallen people continue to bear God’s image, continue to know the natural law, and that this knowledge removes all excuse for sin.¹³⁰ But there is less agreement on the effectiveness of this knowledge, to which we now turn.

Effect of Suppression on Moral Reasoning

We have reviewed the biblical teaching that fallen men retain a knowledge of God and a

¹²⁸ Ibid., 3.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 138.

¹³⁰ Frame, “Review,” 3, *Christian Life*, 244.

moral sense which operates through conscience. We have also seen that although they do know the truth, they contrive to suppress it and go to great lengths to avoid it. The extent of the impact of this suppression on moral reasoning is an area of ongoing debate. We can distinguish three general views of the extent of the fall on man's moral reasoning. The first view, typically associated with traditional Roman Catholic thinkers, is that the fall did not affect man's ability to reason. Therefore, by the right application of his reason to natural revelation, man can clearly understand his moral obligations before God. A second view is that the fall affected man in every capacity, including his reason, so that he suppresses the truth, and cannot read natural revelation correctly. Yet, because he retains his knowledge of God and moral obligations, and his suppression of that truth is incomplete, it is appropriate and useful to appeal to natural law in ethical discussions. The third view is similar to the second view in its assessment of the fall. However, according to this view, the effect of the fall is so devastating that man's suppression of the truth does not allow for any reliable moral consensus of what is right and wrong. Any substantial movement on ethical issues requires God's saving grace, revealed in the Scriptures, so that man can respond rightly to natural revelation. So on this view, Scripture is required for meaningful ethical discussions because it is the only way to overcome man's suppression of the truth. Reformed proponents of natural law generally hold to the second view, while Reformed critics generally hold to the third view, and this remains one major area of disagreement.

John Frame writes that fallen man's suppression of the truth is never complete, and his moral knowledge still has an influence over him.¹³¹ He agrees that natural law can be known apart from Scripture, but denies that it can be "rightly used."¹³² He does not define "rightly used," but I suspect he means that because of fallen man's distortion of natural revelation, he

¹³¹ Frame, "Review," 11.

¹³² Ibid., 2.

cannot come to a full saving knowledge of God, and if he does perform morally upright actions, he does not do so with the right motives. It is certainly true that man does not use it “rightly” in this sense. However, because fallen man does retain moral knowledge which he is unable to fully suppress, and which presses in on his conscience, he *is* able to maintain some measure of outwardly moral behavior. For instance, when a person, apart from a knowledge of Scripture, acknowledges that it is wrong to have an abortion or to hasten an infirm person’s death, they are “rightly” applying that moral knowledge they have through natural revelation. In this sense, I believe that natural law *can* in fact be “rightly used” by God’s common grace.

We saw earlier that Frame urged the application of Scripture to all ethical questions because saving grace is required to overcome man’s suppression, and saving grace only comes through hearing the message of Scripture. He argued that our goal should be to eliminate the “undesirable situation” of the unbeliever by bringing them to a saving knowledge of Christ so they can then look at every ethical decision through the eyes of Scripture. It is certainly our duty as Christians to serve to fulfill the Great Commission by evangelizing the nations, to the extent that we are gifted as individuals to do that. But it seems that a distinction needs to be made between the goal of evangelism and the goal of living in peace with our neighbors in a pluralistic society, and working to maintain a measure of justice in civil life. I agree with Frame that it would be best if all individuals became Christians so they could apply Scripture to every ethical decision. But apart from this situation, which, at least in my understanding of the Bible and history, will not occur until glory, is there no recourse to have meaningful ethical discussions with our neighbors who do not accept Scripture? If our goal in such discussions is not full conversion, but rather to persuade someone of a moral truth that they know through natural revelation, then it seems like appealing to natural law is a legitimate and helpful approach. When

such a distinction is made, I do not believe that fallen man's suppression of truth requires that Scripture must be brought to bear on every ethical discussion.

We also saw earlier that Frame seemed to imply that Scripture can prevent its own distortion in the human heart, so that suppression operates differently on special revelation as opposed to natural revelation.¹³³ I think the distinction must be applied here as well. It is certainly true that faith comes by hearing the message, and therefore, God is pleased to bring his saving grace through the message of Scripture. The special revelation of Scripture, then, seems to have a special priority in this case over natural revelation. One reason for this priority is that Scripture tells us more clearly about the details of man's sin, and clearly presents God's redemptive work through Christ, something that we cannot learn from natural revelation. This important difference will be further explored in the following chapter. But it should be clear that apart from God's saving grace, fallen man distorts all of God's revelation, whether in nature or in Scripture. Therefore, it is not Scripture itself that prevents its own distortion, but rather God's saving grace. Once saving grace is applied, both natural and special revelation can be read clearly. Prior to that, whatever knowledge a sinner has of special revelation can be suppressed just as his knowledge of natural revelation is suppressed. But man's suppression of natural revelation does not eliminate the weight of that revelation pressing in on him, and therefore the weight of arguments based upon that revelation, which he knows in his heart to be true.

VanDrunen, along with other proponents of natural law, emphasizes the fact that fallen man never completely suppresses God's truth and that his moral knowledge of what is right and wrong continues to operate through conscience. Although there are varying degrees of suppression, all men have moral knowledge at some level, and it is appropriate and useful to

¹³³ Frame, "Is Natural Revelation Sufficient," 952-953.

appeal to this knowledge they retain through natural revelation. Therefore, although Scripture is certainly required for a knowledge of the gospel and salvation, we can have meaningful ethical conversations with our neighbors in public or private by appealing to natural revelation alone. I believe that VanDrunen's approach here is correct and helpful as far as it goes. We can certainly have meaningful and persuasive ethical discussions with nonbelievers based on the moral knowledge they have through natural revelation. But although he occasionally mentions the suppression of the truth by nonbelievers, and wisely comments that there are no foolproof natural law arguments, he does not deal substantially with how this suppression of truth impacts our ability to make such arguments. It seems to me that by largely ignoring this important issue, VanDrunen at least gives the impression that we can expect more from natural law arguments than is actually warranted. I agree with John Frame's criticism at this point:

I think it remarkable that Van Drunen says nothing more in the book [*A Biblical Case For Natural Law*] about the unbeliever's suppression of the truth. . . . To understand the unbeliever's moral conscience, we must understand not only his exposure to natural law, but also the paradox of his recognizing it while rebelling against it. Van Drunen seems to be entirely unaware of this complication."¹³⁴

VanDrunen does acknowledge that natural law arguments will often be rejected,¹³⁵ but does not offer any suggestions for proceeding beyond that rejection. It seems to me that if an argument from natural law is rejected, it is appropriate to bring in Scripture at that point, to show that our ethical arguments are supported by both natural and special revelation, and bear God's authority. The argument may still be rejected, but the unbeliever is made aware that he is rejecting both the internal witness of his knowledge of natural revelation, and the Scriptures.

In summary then, there is a strong tension between man's knowledge of moral truth and his suppression of it. But this suppression is not absolute and man still retains the moral

¹³⁴ Frame, "Review," 3.

¹³⁵ See, for instance, VanDrunen, "Natural Law and Christians."

knowledge that he has through natural revelation. It is therefore appropriate to appeal to that revelation when making ethical arguments. It is important to remember that Scripture can be rejected, just as natural revelation is rejected. But Scripture does have a special role in overcoming suppression, because it is a vehicle for saving grace. Suppression is only overcome by the regeneration of God's saving grace, and the Scripture presents the saving message of the gospel. Once such a change occurs in the heart of an individual, Scripture serves as the "spectacles" which help them to read natural revelation rightly. But spectacles are only helpful for those who wear them, namely, those who have been regenerated. Of course, it would be best if every person were regenerated so they could properly interpret ethical arguments, but it is not necessary that a person be regenerate to have a knowledge of right and wrong, and therefore to appreciate an ethical argument at some level. Therefore, fallen man's suppression of God's truth is not an adequate basis to justify a demand that we appeal to Scripture for all ethical arguments. Natural law has a valid place in our arguments because of man's ongoing moral knowledge through natural revelation. At the same time, we should not be afraid to appeal to Scripture when appropriate, even when interacting with those who do not know or acknowledge the authority of Scripture.

Summary

I have argued in this chapter that natural law, along with the law found in Scripture, is revealed by God, and furthermore, that both natural law and the law in Scripture are *moral* law. Although there are differences in comprehensiveness and clarity, they are substantively the same, differing in the mode of delivery. Man's knowledge of natural law certainly continues after the fall, and continues to press in on him through the operation of conscience. All men know what is

right and wrong through natural revelation, including being made as moral beings in God's image. Although they suppress the truth about God and their moral duty, this suppression is not absolute. It is therefore, appropriate and useful to appeal to their natural moral knowledge when making ethical arguments. Scripture may be rejected just like natural law, but Scripture alone presents the gospel, which is the means of God's saving grace. While it is desirable that all come to a saving knowledge of Christ, such saving knowledge is not necessary to be able to make right ethical decisions. Unbelievers make such decisions every day. For these reasons, I have argued that it is not necessary to appeal to Scripture for ethical discussions in the public square. On the other hand, it may be appropriate and useful to do so, even with those who do not know or accept the Bible as their standard. All of God's revelation is authoritative, and we should not hesitate to appeal to all of it, whether it be in natural or special form.

CHAPTER 7

NATURAL LAW AND SCRIPTURE

Introduction

Perhaps the key question in the debate is the precise relation between natural law and Scripture as sources of ethical knowledge. This question has sometimes been framed by both VanDrunen and Frame in the context of the standard for civil government, specifically, whether either Scripture or natural law should be that standard. Although on the surface this appears to be a simple question, the answer is quite complex, relating in turn to the broader view of culture and the goal of ethical discussions. Both VanDrunen and Frame recognize this as a key difference and each spends time discussing this question in the context of their view of culture: VanDrunen advocating his two kingdom approach, and Frame advocating his transformational approach to culture. These broader approaches to culture have a direct bearing on the conclusions that are drawn regarding the standards for civil government. While it is important to understand the basis for the standards for civil government, we are equally concerned here with the related question of the standards for ethical discussion in the public square and with our neighbors, and therefore, this too will be an important component of our analysis. In this chapter we will compare the two contrasting views under three subheadings: the purpose of ethical discussion, the role of Scripture in culture, and the ethical standards for culture in general.

The Purpose of Ethical Discussion

Because the purpose or end assigned to ethical discussions is so influential in determining the role of Scripture or natural law, we begin with a brief comparison of the positions taken by Frame and VanDrunen. We have seen that John Frame takes a transformationalist approach to culture, arguing that the ultimate goal is to bring everything in culture into submission to the lordship of Christ. This goal then becomes the governing criteria of approaching culture, and everything becomes subservient to this end. The means of advancing the lordship of Christ is to work to convert all of society, because this is the only true way to achieve moral consensus. Man's suppression of God's truth makes his ethical judgments ultimately unreliable, and this can only be remedied by God's saving grace. God's saving grace comes through the gospel, and therefore Scripture should be brought to bear on all ethical questions. Scripture provides the "spectacles" which allow natural revelation to be read rightly. We previously saw Frame's view of revelation: "God designed us to gain moral knowledge, not by either supernatural or natural revelation alone, but by an organic combination of the two, in which by reason and conscience we apply God's supernatural revelation to our lives." Frame here teaches that moral knowledge comes as an organic combination of supernatural and natural revelation, but it is to the end of applying *supernatural* revelation. According to this view, natural revelation is made subservient to special revelation, at least in some sense. I think it better to say that both natural and special revelation are legitimate avenues of moral knowledge, differing in mode of delivery.

Regarding this particular interpretation of Christ's lordship, Frame himself acknowledges that not all Christians hold to his view. He writes: "Some readers, including some Christians, might disagree with this understanding of Jesus' lordship and its relevance to the state. But, at

the very least, this is a view that many Christians have held.”¹³⁶ Frame is quite candid here, but I think he may be understating the disagreement, first of all by using the words “including some Christians” to imply that many who disagree with him are non-Christians, and secondly using the word “some” to imply a minority (not many) of Christians. It is no doubt true that “many Christians” have held to this view, but as mentioned earlier, he does not interact with the many Reformed thinkers, including the Westminster divines, who have written favorably of natural law. And while we may agree that it is our desire to bring everyone to acknowledge the lordship of Christ and to see all of society governed by Scripture, the real question at hand is how to live in a world where this is not the case.

By contrast, David VanDrunen does not see the conversion of society, however desirable that may be, as required to achieve a moral consensus. According to his two kingdom view, Christians are part of the civil kingdom and the spiritual kingdom simultaneously. These two kingdoms overlap, and this “dual citizenship” will continue until Christ returns. The transformation of culture is not the primary goal, but rather, we are to live in the civil kingdom as good citizens, influencing it in order to maintain a measure of civil justice and morality, while the gospel advances. One goal of ethical discussions then, is to influence the culture towards obeying God’s law, in order to maintain civil justice in ethical matters. Since much of society either does not know or does not accept the Christian Scriptures as a moral standard, we are better served to appeal to the moral knowledge that all men have through natural revelation. We can see then, that for both Frame and VanDrunen, the view of the ultimate purpose for culture has a shaping influence on how Scripture or natural law should be used in the culture.

¹³⁶ Frame, *Christian Life*, 250.

The relationship of the church to culture has been a matter of debate for centuries, and continues to the present day, even within the Reformed tradition. Does this disagreement in itself prevent a consensus on the relationship of Scripture to natural law? It certainly makes the discussion more difficult, depending on the degree of importance placed upon this starting point. But it seems like some distinctions need to be made. It is certainly true that it is the ultimate goal of the church to spread the gospel to all nations and proclaim the lordship of Christ and his victory over sin and death. And it is right for the church and individual Christians to influence their neighbors and society wherever they can. But Scripture gives us no assurance or expectation that every person, or even every society, will become Christian. In fact, the teaching of Jesus and the witness of the New Testament seems to point in the other direction, equipping Christians to live holy lives in a hostile world where they are strangers and aliens. In my view, the New Testament does not mandate transformation of the civil culture, other than that transformation that naturally occurs through the preaching of the gospel. It seems to me, therefore, that there is a biblical distinction to be made between evangelism and living godly lives as good citizens in a pluralistic culture.

The Place of Scripture

We have seen that Frame's view that Scripture should govern all of society is related to his view that the ultimate purpose of ethical discussions is to bring about submission to Christ's lordship. But if we accept the distinctions between the roles of Christians in proclaiming the gospel versus living as citizens in the culture where God has placed them, then the Christian may have a legitimate influence on neighbors and culture in ethical matters apart from appealing to the Bible. In such cases it may be appropriate to appeal to the Scriptures as an ethical standard,

but it may also be appropriate to appeal to that moral knowledge the unbeliever has through natural revelation, apart from the Scriptures. Appeal to natural revelation may even be preferred in cases where a person is ignorant of the Scriptures, or does not accept them as his moral authority. I submit that both Scripture and natural law have a legitimate role and can be used as ethical standards, depending on the circumstance, and that they are both legitimate starting points in our conversations. Therefore, it is not necessary that Scripture must always be the basis of our ethical discussions in the broader culture.

We also saw earlier that VanDrunen took nearly the opposite approach as Frame with respect to Scripture, arguing that Scriptural imperatives only applied to those who have experienced the indicatives of grace. According to this view, it is not appropriate to appeal to Scripture for those who have not experienced this grace. But all humanity does share the indicative/imperative structure of common grace. All men have experienced God's common grace, having been made in his image, and are therefore bound by his common moral standard, which is the natural law. And so, natural law is the standard we should use in appealing to unbelievers on ethical matters. What are we to make of this approach?

First of all, the indicative/imperative structure is certainly a primary, and perhaps *the* primary, basis of motivation given in Scripture for obeying God's moral commands. For instance, the formula "I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt" or the abbreviated form "I am the LORD" is used 49 times in Leviticus alone in the context of the giving of the law. The possession of God's special revelation was one thing that set God's covenant people apart from the nations (Ps. 147:19-20). This indicative/imperative structure carries over into the New

Testament as well, showing that it is not limited to the nation of Israel, but is rather, a perpetual covenantal obligation.¹³⁷

Is the indicative/imperative structure the only reason for obeying God's special revelation? John Frame gives two reasons why he believes unbelievers are also obligated to obey God's commands in Scripture. In the first, he agrees with VanDrunen to a point, but comes to a different conclusion, arguing that unbelievers are *indirectly* obligated to obey the commands of Scripture. He writes: "Unbelievers have no right, as unbelievers, to appeal to God's redemptive acts and presence [agreeing with VanDrunen here]; but they ought to become believers, so that they can make this appeal. Given that condition, unbelievers as well as believers should make their ethical decisions based on God's redemptive acts, his command, and his presence."¹³⁸ In response to this, we can agree that unbelievers are obligated to obey all of God's commands, the question is upon what basis. The indicative of grace is not an *actual* motivation for them to obey until they experience it, therefore, it is not appropriate to urge their obedience to Scripture on the same ground given in Scripture for God's covenant people. So I do not think it is accurate to say that unbelievers should make their ethical decisions "based on God's redemptive act." The second reason given by Frame is that there are other indicatives in Scripture itself, such as the character of God, man as his image, and the creation ordinances of labor, marriage, and Sabbath. These are other reasons for obeying the imperatives in Scripture, and they are indicatives that belong to men as men.¹³⁹ But it seems to me that these are not reasons for obeying Scripture, rather, they are obligations that all men share to obey the natural law. This is in fact exactly what

¹³⁷ For examples, see Rom. 6:4-13, 12:1, 1 Cor. 6:19-20, Col. 3:1-5, 3:12.

¹³⁸ Frame, "Review," 9.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

VanDrunen argued; that all men share the indicatives of common grace and are therefore obligated to obey the imperatives coordinate with common grace, namely, the natural law.

My own response is along the line of Frame's second reason, but diverges in identifying the basis for the obligation to obey Scripture. The question before us is whether the indicative/imperative structure is the only reason for obeying Scripture. I argued earlier that both natural law and the commands given in Scripture are moral law given by God, the same in substance, but different in mode of delivery, clarity, and comprehensiveness. Because they have the same content, the commands of Scripture reinforce and even amplify what we already know to be true through natural law. Because all men are obligated to obey the natural law, they are also in a sense obligated to obey the commands of Scripture, to the extent that they have the same content. Human beings are obligated to obey the revelation that they have. I see this as a variation on VanDrunen's argument from common grace, but going beyond it in allowing more applicability for Scripture in public ethical discussions. Because Scripture and the natural law both derive from the single Lawgiver, there may be value in appealing to Scripture along with natural law, even for those who do not know the Bible. One other factor in favor of a broader role for Scripture is the New Testament inclusion of the nations. While we typically think of this expansion in terms of evangelism and the spread of the gospel, the law of Scripture is proclaimed also, influencing the nations. I believe this spread of God's special revelation to all nations implies that it can be used in our ethical discussions in the broader culture.

Ethical Standards for Culture

We have seen thus far that Frame and VanDrunen differ in their views of culture, the purpose of ethical discussions, and the role of Scripture in culture. It should not be surprising

then, that they also differ in their assessment of the ethical standards for culture and civil government. Frame argues that Scripture should be the basis of civil government, while VanDrunen argues that natural law should be that standard. We have already considered Frame's teaching that Scripture should govern all of society. At this point we will consider two additional related claims he has made. First, that natural revelation alone is insufficient to govern nations, and second, that pagan nations are responsible to obey God's special revelation.

The first claim that natural revelation is insufficient to govern nations requires further clarification; namely, in what way is it insufficient? Does this mean insufficient to govern at all? To govern with a measure of justice? To govern with perfect justice in submission to Christ's lordship? I suspect that Frame has in mind the strongest sense of the word, corresponding to this last definition, given that he has stated that the goal is to bring all of culture into submission to Christ's lordship. For instance, recall his statement: "The political goal of biblical Christianity is a civil state that acknowledges [Christ] for who he is." But we also saw that Frame acknowledged that not all Christians hold to this view. I confess that I do not find his argument persuasive on this point, and in fact, find the teaching of the Bible and Jesus himself to contradict this "political goal" (Mt. 22:21, Jn. 18:36). I have argued previously that we must make distinctions between the call to evangelize the culture and the call to live as citizens within the culture. So, rather than speak of sufficiency, I think it better to ask whether natural revelation has a legitimate role in influencing our neighbors and even our government toward ethical standards derived from God's moral law. I have argued that it does indeed have such a legitimate and useful role. So while the question and definition of sufficiency may be an interesting philosophical problem, I do not think it is very helpful in understanding the practical role that natural law may have in our ethical discussions.

Regarding Frame's second claim that pagan nations are responsible to obey God's special revelation, I would like to consider this in conjunction with VanDrunen's counter-argument. Recall that VanDrunen argued that natural law, not Scripture, is meant to serve as the moral standard for the civil kingdom. It seems there are two general cases to consider here. In the first case, there are those that historically have not had access to God's written revelation. For instance, we could think of the Greek civilization that was developing during the later Old Testament period, or the Roman Empire that followed. Were nations like this responsible to obey God's special revelation? I'm not sure there is a clear answer to this question. It is certain that those who do not have access to God's special revelation are bound by what they do know, and that is the natural law. And it seems that many nations like Greece and the Roman Empire enjoyed a measure of civil justice based on their knowledge of natural law. Some have argued that we know pagan nations are responsible for obeying God's special revelation because of the prophetic indictments of the nations in the Old Testament. Frame makes this claim, citing Isaiah 10-24.¹⁴⁰ While this is a possibility, it seems that most, if not all, of these indictments, including those in Isaiah 10-24, are based on violations of natural law, not special revelation. The nations are condemned for things like idolatry, wickedness, and brutality against other nations, things which are known through natural law, and many of which are condemned in Romans 1. So although the possibility remains, it seems that in general, pagan nations are held responsible for natural revelation. No doubt, if they were exposed to special revelation, they would recognize much of it as true based on what they already know through natural revelation, but all men are responsible for the revelation available to them.

¹⁴⁰ Frame, "Is Natural Revelation Sufficient," 953.

In the second case, there are those who have had access to the Bible, but do not accept it. Since people and nations are responsible for the revelation they have, I would argue that they *are* responsible to obey special revelation, but not on the basis of the indicative/imperative structure as discussed earlier. But if nations or individuals reject the Scriptures, should we continue to appeal to the Scriptures in ethical arguments? In such cases, it seems like natural law arguments are appropriate, starting with what they know to be true from natural revelation. VanDrunen argues that “believers cannot demand adherence to the Christian Scriptures as a condition for participating in debates in the public square.”¹⁴¹ I agree with VanDrunen that appealing to Scripture in such debates is not required. However, just because a person has not heard, or has heard and rejected, the Scriptures does not necessarily mean that we shouldn’t still proclaim the teaching of Scripture to them. This is certainly what we do in evangelism. When we proclaim the gospel in evangelism, we are also, in effect, proclaiming that all people are subject to God’s law as recorded in Scripture. We often must proclaim God’s truth to them regarding sin and salvation regardless of whether they want to hear it or not. It is not clear why the same should not be the case for ethics. Scripture provides a more comprehensive statement regarding ethics than does the natural law, and therefore it seems that it may often be wise for us to proclaim that ethic to bring clarity to public discussion, even when people do not accept the authority of Scripture. Just as in the realm of redemption, Scripture has a power that speaks for itself. Furthermore, Scripture reinforces the knowledge of the natural law that fallen man already has, and this continuity can be noted in our conversations. If Scripture is a more comprehensive statement of the natural law, it seems that it can be used effectively in many public discussions.

¹⁴¹ VanDrunen, *BioEthics*, 35.

At this point, we should note that both authors seem to express some reservation in their positions. VanDrunen, while arguing that Scripture should not be the standard for civil government, still acknowledges that supernatural divine revelation “binds morally the whole of the human race.”¹⁴² And although Frame argues for the use of Scripture, he makes positive statements supporting appeal to natural law in some cases. For instance, he says that “there may be pragmatic reasons at times for Christians to defend their views of government by reference to nature, rather than to Scripture.” And after making the argument that Scripture should be the standard for civil law, he says that he “would not insist on bringing up Bible passages in every political debate.”¹⁴³ So although he argues for the necessity of using Scripture in civil government, he implies we needn’t always do so.

Turning now from the question of civil government to ethical questions in society, Frame, as I have noted, here also appeals to Scripture as the ultimate authority for such questions. Of course, for Christians, Scripture must be our ethical standard, for Scripture provides the most clear and comprehensive source of revelation for the believer, and we have the illumination of the Spirit to make Scripture clear to us. However, Frame also applies this same criteria to those who are not familiar with or do not accept the Bible as an authority. So, for instance, doctors and other people in positions of authority are to be required to submit to biblical principles. Two specific situations he discusses serve as examples of his approach. The first is a situation where a Jehovah’s Witness refuses a blood transfusion for himself and his daughter after an automobile accident. What should the physician do? We saw earlier that Frame introduces the idea of competence here, defining it as “conformity to God’s will.” He argues that because the Jehovah’s Witness has a false view of God, he is incompetent to make decisions about blood

¹⁴² VanDrunen, *Biblical Case*, 1.

¹⁴³ Frame, *Christian Life*, 602; 250.

transfusions for his daughter. The doctor in such a case should transfuse the daughter, supported by the church and civil courts if necessary. The second example is one of confidentiality. In order to minimize conflicts over confidentiality, the physician should “require the patient to agree to allow him to follow biblical principles of confidentiality.”¹⁴⁴ Both of these examples require adherence to biblical principles in decision-making for all involved, including the doctors, patients, and even civil courts.

What do we do when either doctors or patients do not accept these principles? Frame knows that this is a likely scenario, writing elsewhere that “Nonbelievers, of course, won’t usually accept Scripture as authoritative.”¹⁴⁵ But it seems that Frame’s only recourse is to try to convince them to accept biblical principles. What do we do if that ultimately fails? As far as I know, he does not offer any solution to this question. VanDrunen offers a critique of Frame’s writing on this point in his discussion of various approaches to bioethical questions. He identifies five distinct approaches to bioethical questions and places Frame in the category he labels “Christian Bioethics Only.” Regarding Frame’s view, he writes:

He notes the deficiencies of secular bioethics, but never discusses whether secular bioethics is a legitimate enterprise in any respect, nor does he acknowledge the legitimacy or usefulness of any nonbiblical source of moral knowledge (such as a concept of natural law known through God’s general revelation). For Frame, society-wide bioethical questions are simply to be solved by applying biblical principles.¹⁴⁶

One problem with this approach is that it is unlikely that biblical principles will be accepted in a culture that is not predominately made up of Bible-believing Christians. For instance, it is hard to imagine a civil court, or even a doctor, declaring a Jehovah’s Witness incompetent because he has a false view of God. It seems much more likely today that the

¹⁴⁴ Frame, *Medical*, 46.

¹⁴⁵ Frame, “Is Natural Revelation Sufficient,” 954.

¹⁴⁶ VanDrunen, *Bioethics*, 25.

Christian would be the one considered incompetent because of his belief in one authoritative God! Of course, one could argue that if appeal to Scripture in such situations is required by God, then its effectiveness is irrelevant, and we must do it anyway. But it is my conviction that Scripture itself recognizes a legitimate role for the moral knowledge gained through natural revelation, and that appeal to Scripture is not *required* either in civil government discussions, or ethical discussions in the broader culture. Therefore, although Frame's insistence on applying Scripture to Christian ethical decision-making is right and helpful, I believe his argument to apply this approach to the broader culture and civil government is not persuasive and practically unsatisfying. It seems to me that we should not demand that non-Christians submit to Scripture in such cases, but rather, we should continue the ethical conversation based on the moral knowledge they do have through natural revelation.

Summary

This chapter has considered substantial differences between the two positions, differences that approach presuppositional status, running deep and being held with strong conviction. Such differences will not be easily reconciled. I have suggested something of a middle road which attempts to do justice to concerns on both sides, while avoiding an either/or dilemma. We should acknowledge and affirm that moral knowledge is found both in God's natural and special revelation. Without compromising the authority of Scripture, we should recognize that natural revelation has a legitimate role in ethical discussions with unbelievers. Because of their knowledge of natural revelation, appeal to Scripture is not necessarily required in such discussions. But we should avoid the opposite extreme of ignoring Scripture. The Bible can be a powerful witness for those who have not heard it, and even for those who do not accept it. It

overlaps with, confirms, and illuminates what unbelievers already know through natural revelation. And the spread of the gospel to all nations implies a far-reaching moral influence of the law of God found in Scripture. Therefore, both natural law and Scriptural arguments are permissible for ethical conversations in the public square, for discussions with our neighbors, and for influencing civil government. And both Scripture and natural law can serve as starting points in such conversations. We should make use of all of God's revelation in our ethical discussions, appealing to whichever source of that revelation is most appropriate in each circumstance.

CHAPTER 8

NATURAL LAW ARGUMENTS

Introduction

I have argued that natural law arguments have a legitimate role in our public and private ethical discussions with unbelievers in the culture. But making such arguments is not always easy. Many natural law proponents have failed to recognize some of the difficulties associated with such arguments. When these difficulties are not well-understood, natural law arguments may not be compelling, may not be cogent, or may even commit logical fallacies. In this chapter we will consider some of the practical difficulties associated with natural law arguments in order to avoid the potential pitfalls. We will also examine how natural law arguments work and consider what to do if they are rejected.

The Naturalistic Fallacy

One common mistake in natural law arguments is to assume that arguments are made based on what is “natural.” The problem with this is that since the fall, what seems natural to us may not be natural at all! What comes naturally to us as fallen children of Adam is sin. After the fall, a natural feeling may be right (e.g., love of parents for children), but sometimes a sinful desire may feel just as natural. The term “natural” in natural law or natural revelation refers to nature as God created it. The testimony of nature in the creation continues to point humanity to

God, just as it did from the beginning, prior to the fall (Ps. 19:1-4). But when we use “nature” to refer to humanity as created in God’s image, we must distinguish between that nature which God created, and the natural man after the fall who is now sinful by nature. Natural law refers to the continuing moral knowledge that man has after the fall, operating through conscience. Therefore a natural law argument can never be based on what is or feels “natural” without that important clarification. “Natural” refers to the nature of things, as created. This may seem like an obvious distinction, but this remains a source of confusion for some who would argue based on what is or feels “natural.” VanDrunen writes: “Christians should generally be skeptical of arguments that rest upon simple appeal to what is or feels ‘natural.’”¹⁴⁷ Those making natural law arguments must ensure they are referring to the right standard.

This then leads us to consider John Frame’s prominent criticism that many natural law arguments fall prey to the naturalistic fallacy. This fallacy occurs when we observe something that “is,” and then reason that this is the way it “ought” to be. But the mere existence of a state of affairs has no normative status in itself, and so it is an error to move from “is” to “ought.” We saw earlier that it was not clear whether Frame himself believes it is entirely possible to avoid this fallacy, but at the very least, he considers it a common danger to be avoided in natural law arguments. Interestingly, David VanDrunen does not deal with this possibility in any substantial way, if at all. The root issue here is that not everything “natural” is normative. For instance, it is natural to preserve life (and unnatural to take a life), and this is a normative truth. However, it is also natural for hair to grow long, but it is not a violation of natural law if we decide to cut it. Therefore, there is no fallacy involved in arguing that life should not be taken, but it would be a fallacy to argue that we should not cut our hair. What is it that makes one of these acts

¹⁴⁷ VanDrunen, “Natural Law and Christians.”

normative, and the other not? How do we tell the difference?

J. Budziszewski offers a helpful answer to this question: “An ‘is’ which merely ‘happens to be’ has no moral significance because it is arbitrary; that’s why it cannot imply an ‘ought.’ But an ‘is’ which expresses the purpose of the Creator is fraught with an ‘ought’ already. Such are the inbuilt features of our design, including the design of deep conscience.”¹⁴⁸ This is a fine answer, and helps us understand why an unbeliever may find an argument compelling. A sound natural law argument will resonate in the heart of the hearer because he knows it to be true through natural revelation. To borrow Budziszewski’s language, he will recognize an inherent “ought” in the argument, which will not be present if a naturalistic fallacy has been committed. This is the situation for the hearer, but what about the person giving the argument? How do they know if they are arguing correctly? First of all, a Christian employing a natural law argument has the same testimony of conscience as the unbeliever, but with the significant advantage of the indwelling Holy Spirit, renewing the mind and sanctifying the heart, so that natural revelation is understood more clearly. And second, a Christian also has the additional light of Scripture to confirm the testimony of natural revelation. So a Christian making an argument from natural law must be careful that any argument made from an “is” must be in accord with a right interpretation of God’s moral law, the divine “ought.”

The example of haircutting makes the error plain, but we might consider a more controversial case: contraception. This is an example where Christians disagree. The argument goes as follows: It is natural for intercourse to produce offspring, therefore we should not use contraception to prevent fertilization. John Frame argues, and I agree, that this is a naturalistic fallacy. He writes: “Opposition to contraception is not like opposition to murder, stealing,

¹⁴⁸ Jay Budziszewski, *What We Can’t Not Know: A Guide* (Dallas: Spence, 2003), 108. Cited approvingly by Frame in *Christian Life*, 247.

unfairness, or betraying friends.”¹⁴⁹ This is something natural that, like uncut hair, is not normative. We know that it is not normative because it is not confirmed in Scripture, which again, derives from the same source, God’s moral law. But the very fact that Christians disagree on this issue highlights the difficulty in making natural law arguments and the danger of the naturalistic fallacy.

There is one other potential danger here to be avoided, that of “proving too much.” In the zeal to avoid appealing to special revelation, it is possible to come dangerously close to an autonomous type of reasoning. One example of such a danger is found in VanDrunen’s argument against abortion in his article in *Modern Reformation*. In this argument, which is generally a fine argument from a natural law basis, he argues that there is a general knowledge of a natural law truth that killing infants is wrong. This truth can then be used to argue that it is also wrong to kill an infant in the womb. But in the course of this argument, VanDrunen says that a compelling argument can be made against abortion because of “the social consensus that infanticide is immoral.”¹⁵⁰ The danger here is that we have moved from a “natural law truth” to a “social consensus.” Now, if our argument is based upon a social consensus, then the outcome of our argument may change when the social consensus changes, and we may open ourselves up to all kinds of other undesirable conclusions based on starting with a social consensus.¹⁵¹ I suspect that what VanDrunen has in mind here is that the “social consensus” is *evidence* of a universal moral knowledge of natural law, but his choice of wording here illustrates the danger of appealing to what most people accept as morally right or wrong. If we base our arguments on

¹⁴⁹ Frame, *Christian Life*, 247.

¹⁵⁰ VanDrunen, “Natural Law and Christians.”

¹⁵¹ Recall that Nelson Kloosterman charges VanDrunen with both naturalistic and sociological fallacies here. See Kloosterman, 106.

this “consensus,” we are then faced with the difficulty of explaining why a social consensus is not always right!

Natural Law Reasoning

John Frame offers some very insightful thoughts on how natural law actually works in a person’s consciousness. He writes, “Thomas Aquinas and others thought that God reveals [ethical standards] through our ability to construct arguments, deducing conclusions from natural phenomena. . . . More likely, the knowledge of natural revelation comes to us in an intuitive manner, though some may be able to develop arguments based on that intuited data.”¹⁵² Another way of saying this is that knowledge of natural law does not come to us through propositions, or even direct experience, rather, it is an intuition. The use of “intuition” should not imply that it is less powerful than propositions. This “intuition” is true and clearly known by every human being. The premises of a natural law argument are often, if not always, dependent upon this intuition. We can see how this works in an argument by comparing two simple syllogisms. The first example is a typical argument that does not use intuition:

All men die (experience).

John is a man (observation).

Therefore, John will die.

¹⁵² Frame, “Is Natural Revelation Sufficient,” 954.

The second example is a typical natural law argument against abortion that uses intuition:

It is wrong to take an innocent human life (intuition).

A fetus is an innocent human life (requires proof).

Therefore, it is wrong to destroy a fetus.

Notice how the first premise is an intuition, not something we know by experience. The weight of the argument depends in part on the fact that all men know it is wrong to kill. This is not something that we have demonstrated, rather it is an intuition known to be true through natural revelation. So although based on intuitive knowledge, such an argument can be very persuasive, precisely because all men know this intuition to be true.

Frame critiques this argument against abortion by questioning the second premise, since it requires proof itself. He argues that the Bible teaches that a fetus is a human life (actually a person), but believes it is difficult to prove this without appealing to Scripture.¹⁵³ I agree with him that the second premise must be proven to the satisfaction of the hearer, and that arguing for it from Scripture is one way to try to do that. But if a person does not accept Scripture as true, this will not get us very far. In this case, David VanDrunen has offered what I believe to be a compelling argument by bringing in what we know to be true from science and the principle of continuity of the fetus.¹⁵⁴ Frame seems to approve of this general approach. He writes: “The relevant scientific data confirm the argument from Scripture that unborn children are persons.” And he goes on to say that “in their hearts, I think most people know that you cannot exempt the

¹⁵³ See Frame, *Christian Life*, 248, 725-726.

¹⁵⁴ See VanDrunen, “Natural Law and Christians,” and *Bioethics*, chapter 6.

unborn from the category of innocent persons.”¹⁵⁵ Frame seems to agree that most people know abortion is wrong, but his critique centers on the fact that this is known by intuition and not by an argument based on scientific premises. But it seems to me that the natural law argument against abortion can be persuasive *because* it is already known to be true through intuition. The power of the argument is just that it brings this intuition to the forefront.

Handling Rejection

Practically speaking, fallen man’s suppression of the truth means that many moral arguments will be rejected, whether they are made from Scripture or from natural law. In this light, we may appreciate VanDrunen’s comment that no natural law arguments are foolproof, and every argument has a chance of succeeding or failing. Such arguments are often based upon premises that are intuitive, and their weight will depend upon whether a person accepts the intuitive premises. If they accept the premises, the argument will likely be persuasive to them. No doubt, many will accept them, or at least recognize them as true based on their natural moral knowledge. But there will always be skeptical individuals who reject them, those who will steadfastly deny any moral knowledge common to humanity. How are we to handle such rejection?

VanDrunen writes: “If unbelievers deny outright that acts such as murder and theft are wrong, there is very little Christians can do except note the utter impossibility of civil life under such assumptions.”¹⁵⁶ This is certainly one valid approach to trying to convince moral relativists and skeptics, since both relativism and skepticism are self-refuting epistemological positions. However, if it is a case where someone denies that they intuitively know murder is wrong, and

¹⁵⁵ Frame, *Christian Life*, 725; 726.

¹⁵⁶ VanDrunen, “Natural Law and Christians.”

questions how we can know this as a truth, then it seems appropriate at this point to direct attention to God as the lawgiver, and his Word, which clearly teaches that murder is wrong. Why should I accept that murder is wrong? In the case of skeptics, it generally will not work to say “Because you know deep down that it is!” At this point a better answer is that murder is wrong because God, as the ultimate standard for right and wrong, has declared it to be wrong, and he has built this knowledge into all human beings and confirmed it in his written Word. So it seems that we can argue *that* murder is wrong from natural law (as an intuitive truth), but if pressed to say *why* murder is wrong, we must ultimately appeal to God as the lawgiver. When faced with such skeptics, it may also be appropriate to take a more apologetical approach in order to provide a defense of the Christian worldview, the authority of Scripture, and the futility of non-Christian worldviews. The line between ethical argumentation and strict apologetical reasoning is not a hard one, and there is room for much overlap between them, but when faced with ultimate rejection of ethical arguments from natural law or Scripture, the conversation may need to consciously be shifted into an examination of the person's worldview and presuppositions that govern their rejection of the ethical argument.

Summary

We have seen in this chapter that arguments from natural law are somewhat different from arguments based on experience and observation. They tend to be more intuitive in nature, precisely because the natural moral knowledge is also an intuitive knowledge. This does not necessarily make them less persuasive or powerful than an argument from Scripture, particularly for those who do not accept the authority of Scripture. Rather, it means that those making natural law arguments should be aware of this fact, and aware of the dangers of appealing to what is or

feels “natural.” The naturalistic fallacy should also be carefully avoided. And when natural law arguments are rejected, as they often will be by those seeking to be their own authority, we should consider appealing to God as the ultimate lawgiver, the Creator/creature distinction, and the irrationality of living as if this standard does not apply to everyone.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

We have seen that natural law is a biblical idea whereby all mankind possesses a universal moral knowledge through natural revelation. The content of this knowledge includes the existence and character of God, standards of right and wrong, and an understanding of guilt and impending judgment for breaking this law. This knowledge persists after the fall, despite mankind's willful suppression of God's revealed truth. The doctrine of natural law has an important place in the history of the Reformed tradition, as we saw in the teaching of John Calvin and the Westminster Standards as representative examples of the Reformed tradition.

The modern disagreement within the Reformed community centers around the continuing validity and usefulness of natural law in civil government and culture. This, in turn, is dependent upon the respective views of the relation of church and culture, the ultimate purpose and goal of ethical discussions, and the place of Scripture in the culture. Convictions on these basic issues are strongly held and ultimately represent two fundamentally different ways of interpreting Scripture which will not be easily reconciled. For this reason, it seems unlikely that a consensus will be reached within the contemporary Reformed community.

Nevertheless, with due consideration of this ongoing difference, I believe it is possible to identify clear positive roles for both natural law and Scripture in public ethical discussions. I have argued that because of the universal persistent knowledge of natural law, it is valid and

appropriate to appeal to this knowledge in ethical discussions, particularly where Scripture is not known or accepted as a moral authority. When making natural law arguments, we must be aware of potential difficulties such as the naturalistic fallacy. But with proper care in constructing such arguments, we can be confident that appeals to natural law can be persuasive because of the universal moral knowledge. Furthermore, although the unbelieving culture does not share the indicative/imperative experience of the people of God as a motivation for obedience to the law, we should not be hesitant to appeal to Scripture as an ethical standard, particularly when natural law arguments are not persuasive. Both the natural law and the written law found in Scripture derive from the same Lawgiver, having the same general moral content, although coming to us through different media. Both natural and special revelation are revealed by God, and we should avail ourselves of all of God's revelation as appropriate for each circumstance.

We might ask how yet another academic debate within the Reformed community can have any practical bearing on the life of the church. I would like to suggest four ways this study is relevant for the church today. First, it is a reminder to us that everyone in our culture knows the truth about God and his law at some level. When we look around at all the evil and ethical confusion in our culture, we may be tempted to forget this. Yet God's common grace continues to restrain sin, and the knowledge of his law is never completely erased from the consciousness of our culture. This knowledge manifests itself in varying ways and at different levels, but we should be confident in our ethical discussions with our neighbors that they are not able to fully suppress God's truth, and therefore a measure of justice is possible in ethical decision-making, whether it be in a governmental policy or a neighbor's family decision. Second, this study reminds us of how Scripture relates to our culture. We know that Scripture contains the message of the gospel, and is the Word of Life to the perishing world around us. Beyond evangelism

however, we may be unsure of how Scripture relates to an increasingly pluralistic and even anti-Christian society. We must be clear that the indicative/imperative structure does not apply to those outside of the covenant community. But even so, Scripture can be a powerful witness to our culture as the way of true wisdom. Although our post-Christian society may not consciously think of the Bible as a moral standard, there is still a great deal of respect for the Bible, and it is still possible to gain a hearing in ethical matters by explaining what the Bible says. If we are clear on the role of Scripture, then we can be confident in our appeal to all of God's revelation, whether natural or special, and use both as appropriate to every situation. Third, this study can help to stimulate cultural engagement on ethical matters. When we recognize the universality of natural moral knowledge, we should gain confidence to engage our culture, and should not be afraid of entering into ethical discussions and debates. We should be encouraged to speak out and to not withdraw into our own Christian ghetto. Although the image of God is effaced, it can never be entirely blotted out, and as Christians, we can speak God's truth into the ethical confusion and moral relativism that is prevalent in our culture. And finally, it is my hope that this study will serve as a reminder that the views we take on specific issues are driven by our underlying theological beliefs, and ultimately our interpretation of the Bible. This study has demonstrated that the "surface" disagreement on the usefulness of natural law is driven by the views of more basic questions about what Scripture teaches. I hope that in some small way, this study may serve as an example of how to identify underlying basic concerns, how to seek to understand and evaluate such concerns, and how to avoid an either/or polarization by attempting to recognize and appropriate what is best from each of the opposing views. In so doing, we may be able to advance the discussion to further the cause of God's truth for the edification of the church and the glory of God.

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