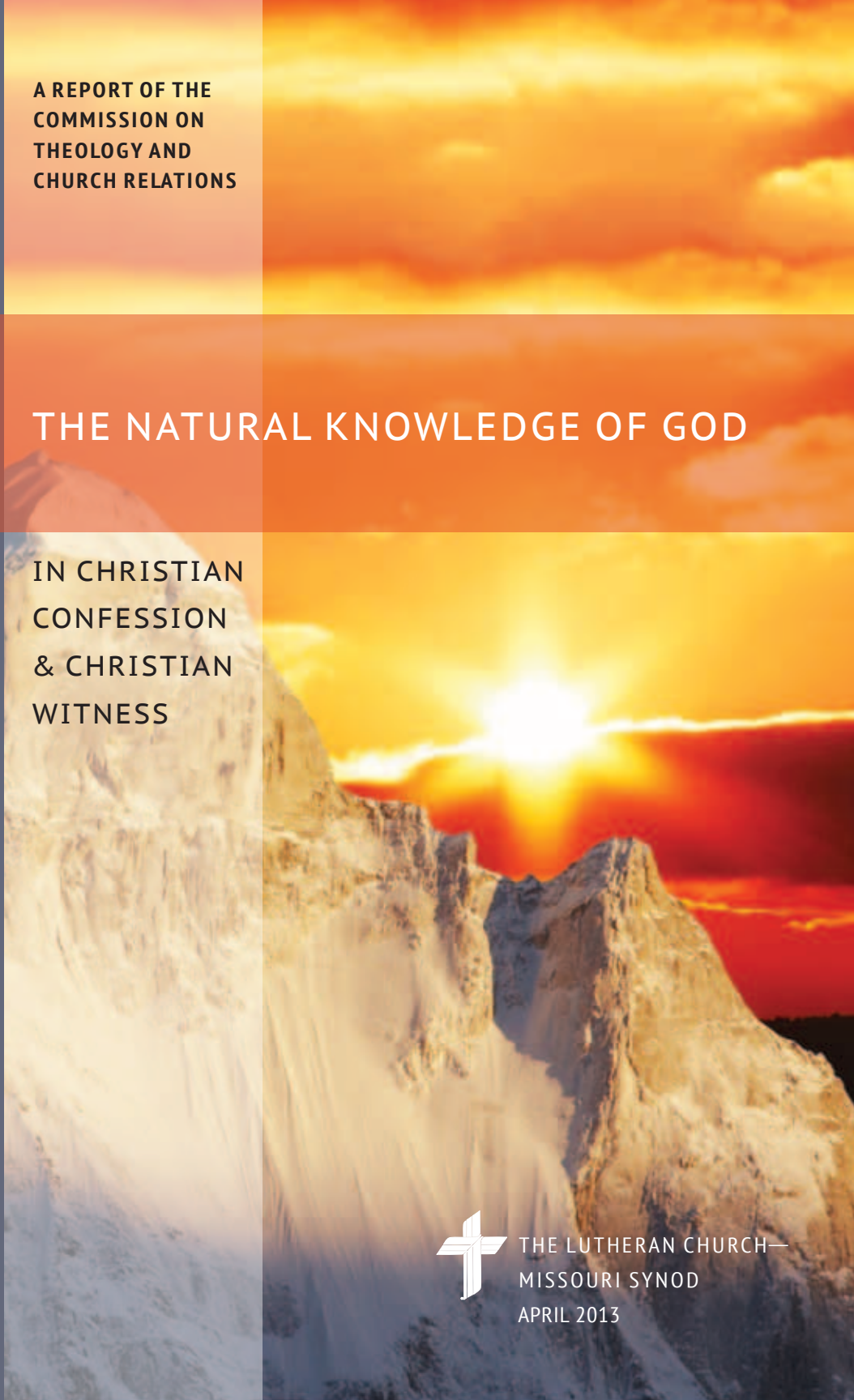
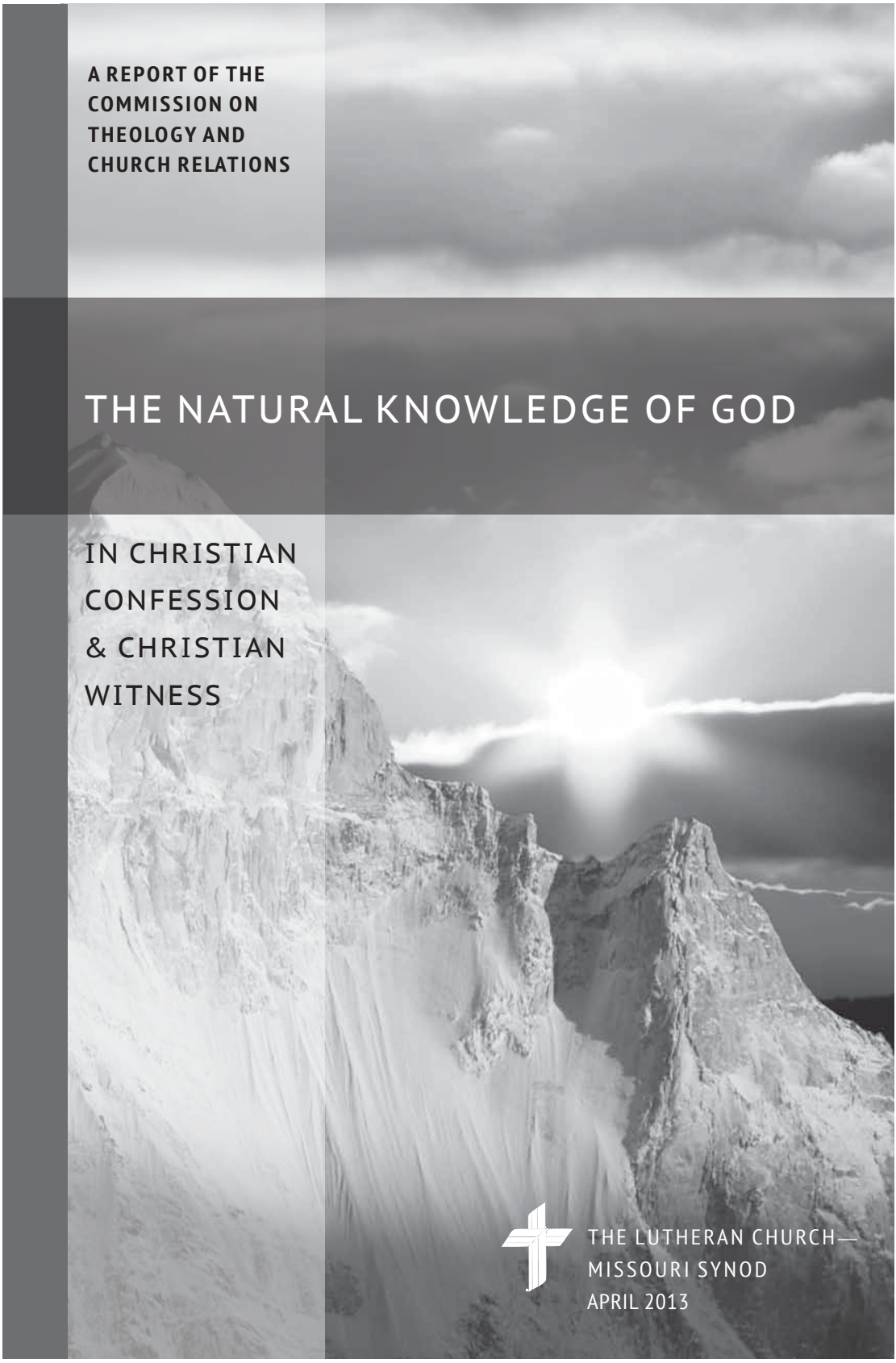
A REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY AND CHURCH RELATIONS

THE NATURAL KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

IN CHRISTIAN CONFESSION & CHRISTIAN WITNESS



THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—
MISSOURI SYNOD
APRIL 2013



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The Natural Knowledge of God: Abbreviations

AC	*Augsburg Confession*
AE	*Luther's Works*. American ed. 55 vols. St.Louis: Concordia and Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955–1986.
Ap	Apology of the Augsburg Confession
FC ep	Formula of Concord, Epitome
FC SD	Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration
LC	The Large Catechism
WA	*D. Martin Luther's Werke, Kritische Gesamtaugabe, Schriften*, 62 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1986)

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Quotations from the Lutheran Confessions are from *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

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The Natural Knowledge of God

in Christian Confession and Christian Witness

I. Introduction

* * * * * *

In the fall semester of her junior year in college, Michelle, a student in the natural sciences, observes a flyer advertising a public lecture on "Contemporary Science and the Question of God." Recognizing the name of the visiting lecturer, she attends more out of curiosity than any real interest in the so-called God question; indeed, she has long described herself as an agnostic—sometimes as an atheist—primarily on the conviction that empirical data either could not address the question of God's existence or, if it did, undermined belief in God. Throughout the course of the lecture, however, she is struck by the presenter's marshalling of empirical data, his suggestion that such data implies a certain "design" in nature, and his persuasive argument that such design further implies the existence of a designer above and beyond nature. Her curiosity further piqued, Michelle approaches the lecture's organizers—a Christian student society—and finds herself pursuing this discussion with them over the following days and weeks. By year's end she is not only attending the society's occasional studies and events, but increasingly even accepting their invitations to worship and Bible study.

On the same college campus, Josh, a religious studies major and life-long Christian who hopes to become a foreign missionary for his denomination, enrolls in a course on the anthropology of religion. Throughout the semester he is continually struck by the fact that no human cultures are known which have not professed and practiced some sort of religion. And while his focus is first drawn to the vast differences between the religious beliefs and expressions of the world's cultures, it gradually shifts to an increasing awareness of their fundamental similarities. Virtually all of the world's religions, he realizes, recognize the existence of a deity; acknowledge that this deity deserves human worship; and express this worship, in part, through relatively common codes of moral behavior. Because these virtually universal beliefs do not derive from a universally shared sacred text, Josh is drawn to conclude that they must have been derived from that which all human beings do share in common: reason and the evidence of the natural world. Further, though, he increasingly wonders why God, who allows these beliefs to be universally acknowledged, would not therefore deem them sufficient for salvation. By the semester's end he finds himself confessing that, though speaking differently of the deity, all religions actually believe in the same God, that all might lead to salvation, and that his desire to become a Christian missionary has almost entirely subsided.

* * * * * *

Though each of the above accounts is fictional, together they serve to illustrate the two-sided coin—or double-edged sword—that is humanity's natural knowledge of God. Making implicit note of the potentially contradictory directions in which one might be led by such knowledge, the 2007 synodical convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) requested the preparation of "a study of the natural knowledge of God, and especially its implications for our public witness." Partially predicating this request was the stated conviction that "[t]he Scriptures teach that all people have a natural knowledge of God," and that "[a]n understanding of the natural knowledge of God can assist the members of the congregations of the LCMS in their witness." Also informing this request, however, was another pair of equally firm convictions: not only is humanity's natural knowledge of God "not saving knowledge"; but its very possession may lead many to be "confused about the one true God" and "to believe falsely that all religions lead to salvation."[1]

That many are indeed confused about the one true God is made more than evident simply by fact of the world's plethora of religions; a host of mutually contradictory conceptions and confessions of the divine must lead inevitably to the conclusion that the vast majority of these are, at the very least, "confused." Similarly evident is that many increasingly do believe that religions other than Christianity can lead to salvation. Surveys conducted in the United States, for example, reveal that this is not only the belief expressed by three quarters of respondents, but even by nearly half of "strongly committed" evangelical Christians.[2]

With regard to the positive premises of the above-noted convention resolution, however, consensus remains elusive, not only within the universal Christian church, but even within the far narrower confines of the world's Lutheran bodies. Dissent from the confession that Scripture itself testifies that "all people have a natural knowledge of God" is not uncommon, even—sometimes especially—among those taking a very high view of Scripture's testimony and authority. Similarly, while one might assume that those admitting of a natural knowledge of God would indeed embrace it as being able to "assist [Christians] . . . in their witness," it has been noted with some warrant

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[1] 2007 Resolution 3-04A "To Call for Study of the Natural Knowledge of God and Its Implications for Public Witness," *2007 Convention Proceedings*, 121.

[2] See, e.g., Pew Research Center and The Pew Forum on Religions and Public Life, *Americans Struggle with Religion's Role at Home and Abroad* (Released 20 March 2002), 2, available online at http://people-press.org/files/2002/03/150.pdf. Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell provide even more recent statistics in *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010). Their 2006 survey reveals that 89% of Americans believe heaven is not reserved solely for those who share their religious faith (534). A 2007 follow-up survey of the original 89%, stipulating that "other faith" be read as "non-Christian faith," brought this percentage down only slightly, with a clear majority (54%) even of evangelical Christians confessing that non-Christian religions can lead to salvation (536). Putnam and Campbell also cite the results of the contemporaneous 2007 Pew Religious Landscape Survey, which largely confirms their own data (538).

that many, "especially those in the Reformed and Lutheran traditions, have historically been cool or hostile to natural theology."[3]

In this light, the present study seeks to examine, first, the biblical, confessional, and dogmatic treatment of the natural knowledge of God and certain intimately intertwined concepts. Various historical and contemporary objections to such knowledge—and any theology or witness purportedly deriving from or making use of it—are then surveyed and analyzed, with the goal of highlighting both the legitimacy and limitations of humanity's natural knowledge of God. Informed by these conclusions, final attention is given to the faithful and fruitful use Christians might make of this knowledge in their public witness. Given the conceptual confusion which sometimes intrudes upon discussion of the issues here addressed, however, it will be advantageous to begin with some preliminary definitions and distinctions.

Natural Revelation: *That general manifestation of God—whether recognized as such or not—in and through nature, as distinct from his special revelation in the incarnate Christ and inspired Scriptures.*

Natural Knowledge: *That knowledge of God, however dim or incomplete, to which humanity has access by means of natural revelation, and apart from special revelation.*

Natural Theology: *That exercise of reason by which a natural knowledge of God is acquired, or by which it is further supported, by means of natural revelation.*

Natural Religion: *False religion (as, e.g., Deism) in which natural revelation, natural knowledge, and natural theology are deemed sufficient for salvation, are elevated to a magisterial position, and are thus made the rule and norm by which even supernatural revelation, knowledge, and theology are judged.*

Natural Law: *Those objective and universal moral precepts—whether or not acknowledged as such, and whether or not recognized as divine in origin—which are innate or accessible to natural reason without recourse to special revelation.*

In light of the various confusions surrounding the nature and, in some cases, the legitimacy of the concepts briefly defined above, their treatment in Scripture, in the Lutheran Confessions, and in the dogmaticians of Lutheran orthodoxy deserves some slightly more detailed examination.

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[3] C. Stephen Evans, "Apologetics in a New Key: Relieving Protestant Anxieties Over Natural Theology," in *The Logic of Rational Theism: Exploratory Essays*, ed. William Lane Craig and Mark S. McLeod (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 65.

II. Natural Knowledge as Christian Confession

> *What is more definite, more certain, less open to question, than what the clear testimony of Scripture presents concerning the natural knowledge of God? . . . Of course the revealed knowledge of God is more complete than the natural knowledge, but it is no more firmly and certainly grounded in the testimonies of Scripture.* ~ Abraham Calov[4]

A. The Testimony of Scripture

Though Scripture is of course the rule and norm of all Christian doctrine, it may nevertheless seem counter-intuitive—even contradictory—to look within God's special revelation for evidence of his natural revelation. And yet precisely because it is on the basis of God's inspired word alone that the church may speak confidently about God's ways with man and about man's knowledge of God, it would be presumptuous to speak dogmatically about any subject on which Scripture remains silent. In the emphatic statement quoted above, therefore, the seventeenth-century Lutheran dogmatician Abraham Calov (1612–1686) appeals not to his own experience or to the opinions of philosophers in affirming a natural knowledge of God; instead, he cites a number of biblical passages, at the head of which stands that passage widely recognized as the *locus classicus* concerning the natural knowledge of God:

> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 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. (Rom. 1:19–20)

Though the language and logic of this text would appear unambiguously to affirm God's natural revelation of himself ("God has shown it to them"), man's resultant natural knowledge of God ("what can be known about God is plain to them," and, later in v. 21, "they knew God"), and even the possibility of a natural theology ("his invisible attributes . . . have been clearly perceived . . . in the things that have been made"), such a straightforward reading is not infrequently rejected either in whole or in part.

Some, for example, conclude that, while it "is plain that the idea of a natural revelation occurs" and that St. Paul here makes "a bare statement of man's factual knowledge of God," the text does not "support any theory of a *theologia naturalis*."[5] Others would restrict the text to confirm that "God through his wisdom is revealing himself in creation," though this revelation is not at all understood or acknowledged by natural man; thus "it is more appropriate and more fitting for Paul's whole theology to conclude that there

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[4] Abraham Calov, *Consideratio Arminianismi* (1655), quoted in Robert D. Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 2 vols (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970 & 1972), 2:21.

[5] Bertil Gärtner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, tr. Carolyn Hannay King (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1955), 82.

is no natural knowledge of God," much less any possibility of engaging in a natural theology.[6] Still others go so far as to reject even the minimal claim that God naturally reveals himself to all men, arguing that Paul's use of the past tense (v. 21: "they *knew* God") implies that he "has in mind a particular historical occasion in the past when the Gentiles actually knew God" on the basis of some special revelation.[7]

Though Christian theology is not, of course, determined by majority vote, it is worth immediately noting that such conclusions are decidedly those of a minority. That God's natural revelation, for example, is so infrequently questioned is largely explained by Paul's explicit claim that God "has shown" (*phaneroun*: made evident, caused to see) even to the unrighteous "what can be known about God." Indeed, especially in light of the contrary prejudices of both his Jewish and Greco-Roman contemporaries, "it is striking to observe how bluntly and unequivocally Paul speaks of divine manifestation to everyone."[8] Though Paul in no way suggests that this natural revelation makes possible a comprehensive knowledge of God—nor, most importantly, any saving knowledge of God—he appears equally unequivocal in stating that "what can be known about God" on this basis "is plain," and that these things "have been clearly perceived." For this reason even modern Lutheran theologians have not hesitated to echo Calov in affirming that "[f]or Paul the knowledge of God is not merely a possibility open to man, but the inexorable reality under which the whole world stands."[9] And, again, though this natural knowledge is entirely insufficient for salvation, Paul can grant that it is, so far as it goes, "true" (cf. vv. 18 and 25). Indeed, it is precisely Paul's assertion that God has clearly revealed himself to all men and that all men thus possess some true knowledge of him that provides the force of his argument. Even those never having heard the testimony of God's special revelation are "without excuse" (v. 20) because they too "knew God" (v. 21) and yet "exchanged the truth about God for a lie" (v. 25). Thus, as one commentator summarizes: "Every person is 'without excuse' because every person—whether a first-century pagan or a twentieth-century materialist—has been given a knowledge of God and has spurned that knowledge in favor of idolatry, in all its varied manifestations."[10]

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[6] Richard H. Bell, *No One Seeks for God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 1.18–3.20* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 97; see also C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 116.

[7] David M. Coffey, "Natural Knowledge of God: Reflections on Romans 1:18–32," *Theological Studies* 31 (1970), 676.

[8] Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 154.

[9] Ralph Bohlmann, "The Natural Knowledge of God," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 34 (1963), 725. See also John Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1934), 143–7, and Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950), 371–6.

[10] Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 98. Compare also Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:372–3, as well as Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics*, 143: "This natural knowledge of God is so certain that the apostle says of all agnostics and atheists, who deny His divine existence and commands, that 'they are without excuse'."

This exchange of a true natural knowledge for the lie of idolatry is highlighted not only in Paul's letter to the Romans (1:23, 25), but it also becomes the prominent focus of Paul's proclamations recorded in Acts 14 and 17—the two passages, after Romans 1, most frequently cited in this context.[11] As with Romans 1, some commentators would dispute whether either passage can legitimately be referenced in support of natural theology,[12] while others are insistent that they "cannot be fully expounded without opening the gate towards some sort of natural theology."[13] While the proclamation of Paul and Barnabas at Lystra (Acts 14:15–17)—the first New Testament record of a public witness to a non-Jewish audience—may not explicitly endorse or exemplify a natural theology, it does at the very least reiterate the claim of God's self-revelation in nature: "he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons" (v. 17).

It is God's providential ordering of creation to which Paul also appeals in his Areopagus address of Acts 17 (esp. v. 26). God has so ordered his creation that all men, says Paul, "should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him" (v. 27). It is rightly noted that Paul's use of the term "seek" draws on its use in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), with connotations of "groping" or "fumbling," and therefore implicitly expresses doubt as to whether the God who should be sought can be truly discovered by natural means.[14] Paul's conclusions regarding natural knowledge and natural theology are therefore perhaps not as emphatic here as in his letter to the Romans. It is worth noting, however, that even some of those who entirely reject any project of natural theology, and who rightly note that Paul's Areopagus address is almost entirely opposed to the beliefs of his audience, are still willing to acknowledge that Paul "does not imply that they knew no true religious propositions nor that Paul had no common affirmation with them."[15]

Though it is primarily the New Testament passages above that are most frequently cited in affirmation of man's natural knowledge of God, the Old Testament does not remain silent on the subject. Foreshadowing Paul's emphasis on the providential ordering of creation naturally revealing its Creator, David proclaims in Psalm 19, for instance, that "[t]he heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork" (v. 1), and that "[t]heir voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world" (v. 4). Further, that this proclamation of nature itself is at least capable of providing some knowledge of its Creator appears to be the clear implication of the verses located between these: "Day to day pours out speech, and

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[11] See, e.g., Roland Ziegler, "Natural Knowledge of God and the Trinity," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 69 (2005), 147.

[12] See, e.g., Bell, *No One Seeks for God*, 99.

[13] James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 26; see also at 36.

[14] See Ziegler, "Natural Knowledge of God and the Trinity," 148–9.

[15] Stephen R. Spencer, "Is Natural Theology Biblical?" *Grace Theological Journal* 9 (1988), 65.

night to night reveals knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard" (vv. 2–3). Or, as one commentator summarizes, "[i]t is not only the fact of general revelation that we find in Psalm 19," but also the fact that this revelation "is known everywhere."[16] It is in light of such Old Testament testimony that it can be plausibly claimed that "the real source from which the Christian natural theology sprang is Hebraic," rather than Hellenistic and pagan.[17]

It must be acknowledged, however, that apparent affirmations of man's natural knowledge of God are not the only parallels evident between the Old and New Testament witnesses. Also evident are similarities in what might, at least on their face, appear to be completely contradictory conclusions. Thus, for example, the same Psalmist who can speak of the heavens declaring the glory of God, of their revealing knowledge, and of this declaration being heard, can also comment more than once on the Lord looking "to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God" (Ps. 14:2, 53:2), and conclude in the negative (Ps. 14:4, 53:4). So, too, in the New Testament the same apostle Paul who could claim that even the heathen "knew God," and had "clearly perceived" even some of his attributes, can also register his agreement with the Psalmist in declaring that "no one understands; no one seeks for God" (Rom. 3:11). Indeed, not only does Paul make an emphatic assertion of what the Psalmist had framed as a rhetorical question, but he amplifies this assertion by frequent repetition. He not only speaks in the past tense, declaring that "the world did not know God" (1 Cor. 1:21) and that "you did not know God" (Gal. 4:8), he also speaks similarly in the present tense of those "who do not know God" (2 Thess. 1:8) and who "have no knowledge of God" (1 Cor. 15:34).

Though apparently contradictory, a closer contextual examination of such passages reveals that they do not in fact undermine the confession of man's natural ability to acknowledge God's existence. They merely—though emphatically—deny that man does or can have any natural knowledge of the saving work of God in Christ. Among those described in 1 Corinthians 1:21 as not knowing God, for example, are the scribes mentioned in the previous verse. Certainly Paul's assertion cannot be read to imply that the Jewish teachers of the law were entirely ignorant of God's existence, or even his attributes. Similarly, when Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:34 that "some have no knowledge

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[16] James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 162, 165. Cf. also H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Columbus: Wartburg, 1959), 178, who concludes that the Creator's existence "is a truth which is apparent even to the heathen," and Franz Delitzsch, *A Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 1 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1883), 349, who writes: "it is no proclamation made in a corner; it is a proclamation in speech that is everywhere audible, in words that are everywhere understood, a *φανερόν*."

[17] Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, 56. Not only do each of the commentators cited in n. 16 above thus conclude with cross-references to Romans 1; Boice, *Psalms*, 1:162, goes further to suggest that "this is exactly what the apostle Paul writes in Romans 1, in a passage that probably has the nineteenth psalm in mind, even though it is not directly quoted." Intriguingly, where Paul does directly quote Psalm 19 (in Rom. 10:18), he seems even to equate nature's proclamation with, in some sense, gospel proclamation.

of God," he addresses this charge directly to "some" within the congregation at Corinth. It is implausible here, too, that he means to imply that some have been received into the church despite their knowing nothing at all about God.

This is perhaps made even clearer by Paul's parallelism of "knowing God" and "being known by God" in Galatians 4:9, where the previous verse's claim that "you did not know God" cannot be read as synonymously parallel with God's not knowing man, that is, not being aware of man's existence. Rather, "'[t]o know' is not used in any mundane sense of either 'to perceive' or 'to acquire knowledge about,' but in the biblical sense of 'to experience,'" and most specifically to experience the grace of God.[18] Thus, as another commentator also notes regarding Paul's similar declaration in 1 Corinthians 1:21, "[a]t this point Paul's Jewish understanding of 'knowing God' comes to the fore. . . . The phrase in the next clause, 'to save those who believe,' is therefore the proper commentary on this one."[19] In other words, the ignorance of God highlighted in these passages is not an absolute ignorance, but an ignorance of the gospel and its effects.[20]

B. The Concurrence of the Confessions

In light of the Lutheran confessors' desire to do nothing other than offer a faithful summary and explication of Scripture's doctrinal content, it will not be surprising that the Confessions set forth the same nuanced portrayal of man's natural knowledge of God that is evident in Scripture itself. Similarly, though, because individual confessional statements—like individual biblical statements—may occasionally appear to contradict others, interpreters of the Confessions—again, like those of the Bible—can often lose sight of this nuance by emphasizing some passages over others.

This is the case, for example, when it is categorically asserted that "the Lutheran Confessions are entirely consistent in denying natural man the ability to know God";[21] that, according to the Confessions, "[n]either God the Creator nor God the exacting Lawgiver, neither God's love nor God's wrath can be recognized in this fallen world";[22] and that such a conclusion "virtually

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[18] Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 180; see also, e.g., Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 72.

[19] Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 72 n. 26; see also *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 395–97, there cited for explication of Paul's "Jewish understanding."

[20] Thus Gregory J. Lockwood, *1 Corinthians* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2000), 582, commenting on 1 Cor. 15:34, can describe it as "ignorance regarding the resurrection *and its implications for the Christian life*" (emphasis added). Cf. also 2 Thess. 1:8 with its parallel between "those who do not know God" and "those who do not obey the gospel." Similarly compare the manner in which the Lord himself speaks even of his chosen people not knowing him in, e.g., Jer. 4:22, Jer. 9:3, and Hos. 5:4.

[21] Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, trans. Paul F. Koehneke and Herbert J.A. Bouman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961), 48.

[22] Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, 48.

exhausts what the Confessions have to say about the 'natural knowledge of God.'"[23] To be sure, there is no shortage of passages which, read in isolation, might support such a stark view. The *Large Catechism*, for example, confesses that, before being brought by God into the communion of saints, "we were entirely of the devil, knowing nothing of God."[24] The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, commenting on the effects of original sin, speaks similarly, noting bluntly that one such effect is "being ignorant of God."[25]

Both the *Apology* and the *Large Catechism* themselves, however, also contain further statements which prevent one from too hastily concluding that any natural knowledge of God is merely a theological fiction. Contrasting the effects of original sin with original righteousness, for instance, the *Apology* notes that the latter afforded man "a *more certain* knowledge of God"—the apparent implication being that man, even after the fall, does not lack all knowledge of God, but can possess only a *less certain* knowledge.[26] Thus the *Large Catechism* can not only note that "[t]here has never been a nation so wicked that it did not establish and maintain some sort of worship,"[27] but also that "[a]ll who are outside this Christian church, whether heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites—even though they believe that there is only one true God and worship [him]—nevertheless they do not know what His attitude is toward them."[28]

In this light it has been well noted that those confessional statements emphasizing natural man's ignorance of God should not be made to say more than they actually do:

> Properly understood, they do not deny the natural knowledge of God, but rather point to the perversion of this knowledge into

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[23] Werner Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, trans. Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia, 1962), 51.

[24] LC 2.52. All quotations from the Lutheran Confessions, unless otherwise noted, are drawn from *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

[25] Ap 2.8; cf. also 2.14, 2.23.

[26] Ap 2.17; emphasis added. Thus, FC SD 2.9 can speak of "a dim spark of knowledge that a god exists."

[27] LC 1.17. It is noteworthy that Luther here echoes, perhaps even paraphrases, the Roman pagan Cicero, who likewise asserted that "there is no tribe so civilized or so savage as not to know that it should believe in a god." Cicero, *The Laws*, 1.24.

[28] LC 2.66. The above translation of this much disputed passage follows that of the Concordia Theological Seminary faculty, "Religious Pluralism and Knowledge of the True God: Fraternal Reflections and Discussion," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66 (2002), 300. For further commentary on this passage, see also Charles Arand and James Voelz, "Large Catechism, III, 66," *Concordia Journal* 29 (2003), 232–4; John Nordling, "Large Catechism III, 66, Latin Version," *Concordia Journal* 29 (2003), 235–9; Thomas Manteufel, "What Luther Meant," *Concordia Journal* 29 (2003), 366–9; E. Christian Kopff, "Who Believes in and Worships the One True God in Luther's Large Catechism?" *Logia* 13/3 (2004), 55–57; Edward Engelbrecht, *One True God: Understanding Large Catechism II.66* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2007); and Jon Bruss, "Luther, Non-Christians, and the One True God: Another Go," *Logia* 20/2 (2011), 57–9.

> an idolatry that is in effect a practical, if not a theoretical, ignorance of God. In other words, man's natural knowledge of God is always *ignoratio Dei* when contrasted with the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ.[29]

Similarly, the Confessions

> do not so much stress the lack of natural knowledge about God as they do its falseness. The natural knowledge of God sets forth a distorted picture of Him. It is incapable of showing us the God who justifies and saves from sin.[30]

Conclusions such as the above—that sinful man's ignorance of God is not to be understood in absolute terms, but only in contrast to that knowledge revealed in the saving person and work of Christ—are further substantiated by the manner in which the Confessions qualify and define the vocabulary employed in discussing man's natural knowledge of God. This becomes evident, for example, in the confessional use of qualifying adverbs such as "truly." The *Formula of Concord* can thus assert that "pagans had something of a knowledge of God," while going on in the same sentence to remark that "they did not *truly* know him."[31] That this adverbial qualifier is best understood in soteriological rather than epistemological terms might further be inferred by comparison with the *Augsburg Confession*'s similar usage: "all who know that they are reconciled to the Father through Christ *truly* know God."[32] Similarly to be understood is the confessional commentary on natural man's understanding (or ignorance) of "spiritual matters." The *Formula of Concord* is quite emphatic, for example, in asserting that "Scripture denies to the natural human mind, heart, and will every ability, aptitude, capability, and capacity to think anything good or proper in spiritual matters by themselves."[33] Quoting Luther, however, the *Formula* proceeds quickly to define the scope of "spiritual matters," referring to "spiritual and divine matters, *which concern the soul's salvation*."[34]

In view of the above it becomes increasingly apparent that what the Confessions—in agreement with Scripture—deny is not any and all natural knowledge of God, but a natural knowledge of the gospel, as, again, the *Formula* makes clear:

> [E]ven though human reason or natural intellect may still have a dim spark of knowledge that a god exists . . . , nevertheless it is

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[29] Bohlmann, "The Natural Knowledge of God," 730.

[30] Holsten Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions (1529–1537)*, trans. Gene J. Lund (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 67.

[31] FC SD 5.22; emphasis added.

[32] AC 20.24; emphasis added.

[33] FC SD 2.12.

[34] FC SD 2.21; emphasis added.

> ignorant, blind, and perverted so that even when the most skillful and learned people on earth read or hear the gospel of God's Son and the promise of eternal salvation, they still cannot comprehend, grasp, understand, or believe it on the basis of their own powers.[35]

In simultaneously affirming natural man's "legal" knowledge of God while denying the possibility of his "evangelical" knowledge of God, the formulators profess not only to be faithfully restating the biblical testimony, but also to be keeping faith with the theology of Martin Luther (1483–1546). Thus they rightly note that

> Dr. Luther emphasized this distinction with particular diligence in nearly all his writings and specifically indicated that there is a vast difference between the knowledge of God that comes from the gospel and that which is taught and learned through the law.[36]

While orthodox Lutherans are doctrinally bound only to the Scriptures and their explication in the *Book of Concord*, and not to any of Luther's own non-confessional writings, such works do provide important insight for properly understanding both the intent and content of the Confessions. Again, the *Formula* itself makes this point explicitly:

> Because Dr. Luther must deservedly be regarded as the foremost teacher of the churches that subscribe to the Augsburg Confession, since his entire teaching in sum and content was set down in the articles of the Augsburg Confession and presented to Emperor Charles V, the actual intention and meaning of the Augsburg Confession should not and cannot be derived more properly and better from any other place than from Dr. Luther's doctrinal and polemical writings.[37]

For this reason some of Luther's own extra-confessional commentary on the natural knowledge of God also deserves brief examination.

C. The Profession of Luther

As noted above, even in Luther's confessional writings he could appeal to the universality of worship as implicit evidence of man's natural knowledge of God. In doing so he simply reiterated the view that would be regularly expressed in his exegetical and occasional writings. Commenting in 1535, for example, he similarly noted that "the forms of worship and the religion that have been and remained among all nations are abundant evidence that at

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[35] FC SD 2.9.

[36] FC SD 5.22.

[37] FC SD 7.41.

some time all men have had a general knowledge of God."[38] He not only confesses that even worshippers of false idols "have a knowledge of divinity in their hearts,"[39] but he also goes so far as to conclude that such worship would be impossible without natural knowledge.[40] Thus, too, can he even regularly reaffirm the more controversial acknowledgement of the *Large Catechism*, that even "heathen, Turks, Jews, or false Christians and hypocrites" are not without the knowledge that "there is only one true God."[41]

Perhaps most revealing of Luther's insistence on this point is his discourse concerning the mariners on whose ship the prophet Jonah had attempted to flee his call to Nineveh. Commenting on Jonah 1:5—"Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god"—Luther writes at length:

> Here you find St. Paul's statement in Rom. 1:19 concerning the universal knowledge of God among all the heathen, that is, that the whole world talks about the Godhead and natural reason is aware that this Godhead is something superior to all other things. This is here shown by the fact that the people in our text called upon a god, heathen though they were. For if they had been ignorant of the existence of God or of a godhead, how could they have called upon him and cried to him? Although they do not have true faith in God, they at least hold that God is a being able to help on the sea and in every need. Such a light and such a perception is innate in the hearts of all men; and this light cannot be subdued or extinguished. There are, to be sure, some people, for instance, the Epicureans, Pliny, and the like, who deny this with their lips. But they do it by force and want to quench this light in their hearts. They are like people who purposely stop their ears or pinch their eyes shut to close out sound and sight. However, they do not succeed in this; their conscience tells them otherwise. For Paul is not lying when he asserts that they know something about God, "because God has shown it to them" (Rom. 1:19).
>
> Let us here also learn from nature and from reason what can be known of God. These people regard God as a being who is able to deliver from every evil. It follows from this that natural rea-

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[38] Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), in *Luther's Works: American Edition* [hereafter AE], 56 vols, ed. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, and St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–86), 26:399.

[39] Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans: Scholia* (1515), AE 25:157.

[40] Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, AE 26:400.

[41] LC 2.66; see, e.g., Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John* (1537), AE 22:153: "All Turks, Jews, papists, Tartars, and heathen concede the existence of a God, the Creator of heaven and earth," and Martin Luther, *Sermon for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany* (1546), in *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* [hereafter WA], *Schriften*, 62 vols (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–1986), 51:151: "Turks, Jews, and all heathen know to say of God as much as reason can know from his works, that he is a creator of all things, that one should be obedient to him, etc."

> son must concede that all that is good comes from God; for He who can save from every need and misfortune is also able to grant all that is good and that makes for happiness. That is as far as the natural light of reason sheds its rays—it regards God as kind, gracious, merciful, and benevolent. And that is indeed a bright light.[42]

Luther's commentary on this passage is further revealing, however, because it immediately proceeds also to highlight the "two big defects" inherent in what is otherwise a "bright light."

> First, reason does admittedly believe that God is able and competent to help and to bestow; but reason does not know whether He is willing to do this also for us. That renders the position of reason unstable. . . . The second defect is this: Reason is unable to identify God properly; it cannot ascribe the Godhead to the One who is entitled to it exclusively. It knows that there is a God, but it does not know who or which is the true God. . . . Thus reason never finds the true God, but it finds the devil or its own concept of God, ruled by the devil. So there is a vast difference between knowing that there is a God and knowing who or what God is. Nature knows the former—it is inscribed in everybody's heart; the latter is taught only by the Holy Spirit.[43]

The distinction here made between knowing "that there is a God" and knowing "who or what God is," though expressed in terms inherited from medieval scholasticism, is precisely that observed in the previous surveys of Scripture and the Confessions and associated with the distinction between law and gospel. Thus it is this language which Luther elsewhere uses to highlight the same distinction. This is seen most explicitly in his commentary on the Gospel of John, for example, where he notes that "There are two kinds of knowledge of God: the one is the knowledge of the Law, the other is the knowledge of the Gospel. For God issued the Law and the Gospel that He might be known through them. . . Reason can arrive at a 'legal knowledge' of God. . . . But the depth of divine wisdom and of the divine purpose, the profundity of God's grace and mercy, and what eternal life is like—of these matters reason is totally ignorant."[44]

It is also in view of this distinction that Luther harmonizes those biblical passages affirming a natural knowledge of God with those biblical passages asserting man's natural ignorance of God. Commenting on Galatians 4:8–9, for instance, he asks, "If all men know God, why does Paul say that before the proclamation of the Gospel the Galatians did not know God?" He answers: "There is a twofold knowledge of God: the general and the particular. All men

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[42] Martin Luther, *Lectures on Jonah* (German, 1526), AE 19:53–4.

[43] Luther, *Lectures on Jonah*, AE 19:55.

[44] Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*, AE 22:150–3.

have the general knowledge, namely, that God is, that He has created heaven and earth, that He is just, that He punishes the wicked, etc. But what God thinks of us, what He wants to give and to do to deliver us from sin and death and to save us—which is the particular and the true knowledge of God—this men do not know."[45] Indeed, so narrowly does Luther—like the confessors—define "true" knowledge of God in terms of gospel knowledge, he can not only reject knowledge of God's existence and creative activity as being "true" knowledge; he can further state: "Nor is this knowledge your belief that Christ was born from a virgin, suffered, died, and rose again. No, you have the true knowledge of God when you believe and know that God and Christ are your God and your Christ."[46]

While rightly emphasizing the narrow scope of that which Luther defines as "true" knowledge of God—that is, knowledge of the gospel, which is inaccessible to natural reason—one ought also to recognize how expansively Luther is able to conceive of that which natural men may—indeed, should—acknowledge on the basis of reason alone. Thus, for example, despite his frequent summary of natural knowledge in simple terms of knowing "that there is a God," Luther regularly allows that men naturally know not only of God's existence, but also of certain of his attributes. As noted above, Luther could assert in his commentary on Jonah that "the natural light of reason" itself "regards God as kind, gracious, merciful, and benevolent."[47] Nor is this an isolated example; virtually the same appears both in his "early" works and his "mature" works.[48]

Luther's own expansive view of natural man's knowledge—though never saving knowledge—of God is especially worth noting because it is not unusual for commentators to posit a radical break between the theology of Luther and the Lutheran dogmaticians on this point. For this reason, brief attention is finally given to the Lutheran dogmatic tradition, especially during the immediate post-Reformation era of "Lutheran orthodoxy."

D. The Doctrine of the Dogmaticians

Representative of interpretations setting Luther against the Lutheran dogmaticians—even the earliest of these—is one prominent quotation and

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[45] Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, AE 26:399.

[46] Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Second Epistle of St. Peter* (1523), AE 30:152.

[47] Luther, *Lectures on Jonah*, AE 19:54.

[48] See, e.g., Luther, *Lectures on Romans* (1515), AE 25:157, where natural knowledge conceives of God as "invisible, immortal, powerful, wise, just, and gracious," and Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1538), AE 3:117: "the heathen also have this understanding; they know that there is a supreme deity, that he must be worshiped, called upon, and praised, and that one should take refuge in him in all dangers. . . . They call God a helper, kind, and forgiving." It does deserve noting, however, that Luther could, on occasion, speak in direct contrast to such views. So, e.g., he could also write that "God so orders this corporal world in its external affairs that if you respect and follow the judgment of human reason, you are bound to say either that there is no God, or that God is unjust." Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will* (1525), AE 33:291.

critique of Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560). Commenting on the natural knowledge of God, Melanchthon could write:

> There flashes in the mind the knowledge which affirms not only that there is one God, the Maker of the whole world and order, in all nature, but also teaches what kind of God He is, namely, wise, beneficent, just, One who assigns like things to like things, truthful, One who loves moral purity, One who demands that our obedience conform to His will, and One who punishes with horrible punishments those who harshly violate this order, as the whole history of the human race bears witness.

In assessing such remarks, one commentator bluntly declares: "How far away from Luther we now are!"[49] In light of Luther's views briefly elucidated in the previous section, however, there appears little warrant for supposing that this conclusion of Melanchthon is "far away" from Luther's own.

That Luther's contemporary, colleague, and co-author of the Confessions did not radically deviate from Luther on this point requires emphasis because it has been rightly noted that "Lutheranism on the whole followed Melanchthon in working out its position on natural theology."[50] Further, that the later Lutheran theologians do indeed follow Melanchthon deserves emphasis on account of suggestions that the dogmaticians progressively fall away not only from Luther on this point, but even from Melanchthon himself.[51] Again, though, it would be far more accurate to conclude that the orthodox dogmaticians not only do not go beyond the conclusions of Luther and Melanchthon, but even that "[o]n no point does Lutheran orthodoxy go beyond the Lutheran symbols in its teaching concerning the natural knowledge of God."[52]

It is certainly true that the dogmaticians, in the interest of clarification, harmonization, and explication, introduce terms and distinctions found infrequently or not at all in Luther and the Confessions. It is likewise the case that the nature and scope of multi-volume dogmatic treatises allowed their authors to treat the subject in greater detail and at greater length than was deemed necessary in the exegetical, polemical, or confessional writings of Luther and his contemporaries. It might even be acknowledged that the seventeenth-century dogmaticians are much more emphatic in their defense of man's natural knowledge, and the possibility of a natural theology, than were Luther and the confessors. Each of these moves, however, was prompted, in large part, by the rise of controversies non-existent in Luther's own day.

Most notably, the Socinian heresy deriving from the teachings of Fausto Paolo Sozzini (1539–1604) flatly rejected the confession that natural man

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[49] Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 52 n. 4, and 53.

[50] Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:176.

[51] Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 50–51.

[52] Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 2:29.

had any innate knowledge of God or any capacity for naturally acquiring knowledge of God. It is especially in view of this denial of biblical and confessional testimony that the seventeenth-century dogmaticians frame their approach to the topic. Abraham Calov is representative in this respect, offering his summary propositions regarding man's natural knowledge in the context of refuting the Socinian position. In opposition to the Socinian denial of reason's ability to acquire some natural knowledge of God, for example, he concludes that "man, destitute of the revealed Word of God, can attain, by the use of sound reason, to some knowledge concerning God, His being and His general will or providence." Similarly opposing the Socinian denial of any innate knowledge, he also concludes that "not only the faculty or power of knowing God, but also a certain knowledge of God, belongs to us by nature."[53] That Calov's position is hardly unique among the Lutheran theologians is rightly noted in its being described as a "typical Lutheran treatment of natural theology."[54]

That Calov, though treating the topic in much greater detail, remains consistent with his predecessors is perhaps hardly surprising in light of the fact that they, too, had already been forced to respond to denials of natural knowledge—and not from an outside sect such as the Socinians, but from within Lutheranism itself. Though not going so far as the Socinians in rejecting the possibility of some naturally acquired knowledge of God, Matthias Flacius (1520–1575) argued already in the sixteenth century that man's nature had been so thoroughly corrupted by the fall into sin that no innate knowledge of God remained.[55] It is with a view to Flacius that dogmaticians such as Johannes Quenstedt (1617–1688) not only defend the assertion that all men do have a natural knowledge of God, but also that this knowledge is "true" knowledge: "that the natural knowledge of God is true, is evident from this, that the apostle expressly calls it truth, Rom. 1:18 sq., and with the addition, the truth of God, v. 25."[56]

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[53] Abraham Calov, *Systema Locorum Theologicorum* (1655–77), quoted in Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1899), 108.

[54] Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:179; see also at 1:173: "There is nothing particularly original or new in the way Calov and the later Lutherans deal with the subject of natural and revealed theology."

[55] For an overview of the "Flacian Controversy" in which context this point arises, see F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Book of Concord* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), 144–52. See also Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 1:176–8.

[56] Johannes Questedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica* (1685), quoted in Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 108. It is to be noted that Quenstedt here freights the word "true" in the broader epistemological sense, rather than the narrower soteriological sense employed by the Confessions. He also qualifies the scope of this truth by immediately acknowledging that "we must distinguish between the natural knowledge of God, considered in and through itself, and in so far as it has united with it imperfection, corruption of reason, and a proclivity to various errors."

The Flacian and Socinian controversies with regard to the natural knowledge of God are significant, however, not merely because they prompted the orthodox dogmaticians to formulate and defend more clearly and extensively the Lutheran position on the subject. They are significant also because they make evident that from the time of the Reformation itself, and even within Lutheranism itself, prominent objections to this position have been put forward. Because such objections have become only more frequent in subsequent centuries, the following section surveys and assesses some of these critiques and their impact on contemporary thinking about the subject.

III. Natural Knowledge and Natural Theology

> *An overreaction to rationalism has made us lukewarm toward natural theology, which in older times was seen as the necessary underpinning of positive theology. These gaps must of necessity be filled.*
>
> ~ Ernst Hengstenberg[57]

A. Enlightenment Opposition

When attention is primarily given to the Lutheran church, the seventeenth century is often deemed the "Age of Orthodoxy." But the same century also inaugurated the European Enlightenment and what is often perceived as the "Age of Reason." With respect to the natural knowledge of God, an explicit connection between the Lutheran dogmaticians and the Enlightenment philosophers is sometimes posited, as in the assertion that "the development of 'natural theology' is the march of history from Luther's primal experience (*Urerlebnis*) up to the Enlightement."[58]

It cannot be denied that this era did indeed witness, in some quarters, a crass reduction of natural theology to "natural religion." Affirming both that God reveals himself in nature and that man's natural reason is capable of deriving some knowledge of God from this revelation, the English Deists, for example, proceeded further to assert that God would be unjust if requiring the confession of something more than this natural knowledge. John Toland (1670–1722), for instance, bluntly demanded to know: why "should God require us to believe what we cannot understand?"[59] As such beliefs would be "contrary to Reason," he purported to demonstrate that the specially revealed

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[57] Quoted in Frederick Gregory, *Nature Lost? Natural Science and the German Theological Traditions of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 116.

[58] Elert, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, 57.

[59] John Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696), extracted in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 346–7.

"Doctrines of the Gospel, if it be the Word of God, cannot be so."[60] Similarly, Matthew Tindal (1657–1733) rejected the content of any revelation "that will not suffer us to judge its Dictates by our Reason," and so concluded that true Christianity must be merely "a Republication, or Restoration of the Religion of Nature."[61] One of the most concise summaries of the contents of this religion of nature, or natural religion, is found in the autobiography of America's most famous Deist, Benjamin Franklin:

> I never was without some religious principles. I never doubted, for instance, the existence of the Deity; that he made the world, and govern'd it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing good to man; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtue rewarded, either here or hereafter. These I esteem'd the essentials of every religion.[62]

These were deemed by Deists to be the "essentials of every religion" precisely because they summarized that knowledge of God which man might acquire naturally and without any aid of special revelation.

In significant respects, however, the Enlightenment project with regard to natural revelation, natural knowledge, and natural theology does not "develop" the conclusions of the orthodox dogmaticians, but those of their opponents Flacius and Sozzini. Illustrative of this is the thought of John Locke (1632–1704), as formulated in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, one of the foundational texts of Enlightenment empiricism. Though for reasons other than those of Flacius, Locke too would reject the belief that man possesses an innate knowledge of God. Indeed, in Locke's influential view, man possesses no innate knowledge at all; in his own famous formulation, the human mind, before acquiring knowledge by means of sensory experience is, "as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas."[63] In contrast to the nearly unanimous teaching of the Lutheran theologians—that man can not only acquire some knowledge of God *via* the evidence of God's self-revelation in nature, but that he also possesses an innate knowledge of God—Locke's philosophy would allow only the former. The implication of this rejection of innate knowledge, inherited and affirmed by Locke's empiricist successors, was to limit the question of man's natural knowledge to that

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[60] Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious*, in *Documents of the Christian Church*, 346.

[61] Matthew Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation, or the Gospel a Republication of the Religion of Nature* (1730), in *Documents of the Christian Church*, 345, 346.

[62] Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. H.S. Commager (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 91, with the same points reiterated again at 106–7. Franklin's summary echoes more or less exactly the "common notions concerning religion" delineated by Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648), often described as the father of English Deism. For Herbert's original formulation, see his *De veritate* (London, 1633), 210–19.

[63] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. A.C. Fraser, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1959), 1:121. In the same section he further clarifies that sensory experience is that upon which "all our knowledge is founded" (1:122).

which might be acquired by sensory experience. And while Locke himself did not deny the possibility of such an acquired knowledge, his more influential later disciples would, thus ultimately echoing the conclusions not only of Flacius but also of Sozzini (though, again, for different reasons).

These further conclusions become most evident in the thought of Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776), whose "criticisms of natural theology are by far the most substantial in the English language and have been equaled in importance, if at all, only by those of [Immanuel] Kant."[64] Though Hume's various objections to the enterprise of natural theology and the possibility of a naturally acquired knowledge of God need not here be specifically detailed, they largely reduce to the argument that there is insufficient warrant for believing that the "effects" in and of the natural world require a supernatural or divine "cause," let alone one that bears any resemblance to the deity posited by classical theism.[65] Thus he concludes bluntly that any inferences from the evidence of nature to the existence of God are "uncertain and useless."[66] In this conclusion Hume is later echoed by the equally influential German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who similarly asserted that "all attempts of a merely speculative use of reason in regard to theology are entirely fruitless," and that "the principles of reason's natural use do not lead at all to theology."[67] His rationale for so concluding likewise parallels that of Hume. Positing an impenetrable barrier between the worlds of *phenomena* (the natural world accessible to the senses) and *noumena* (transcendent realities which may exist beyond man's mental categories of space and time), Kant also restricts man's natural knowledge to knowledge of *phenomena*.[68]

In summary, then, while not ignoring the fact that some Enlightenment thinkers would embrace but distort the Christian affirmation of a natural knowledge of God—replacing the confession that such knowledge is true yet insufficient with the assertion that such knowledge is not only sufficient but is the *only* true knowledge of God—some of the most influential representatives of Enlightenment thought, rather than "developing" the natural theology of the dogmaticians, flatly rejected it. More pointedly, though, in denying both an innate knowledge of God as well as any possibility of an acquired knowledge of him, they denied what appears to be the clear teaching of Scripture itself.

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[64] Terrence Pendlhum, "Hume's Criticisms of Natural Theology," in *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment*, ed. James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 40. See also James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis, "Hume's Legacy and Natural Theology," in the same volume (pp. 11–12) who rightly note that modern philosophical critiques of natural theology virtually all echo Hume.

[65] The substance of Hume's various objections are to be found in sections X and XI of *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, and throughout his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.

[66] David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. C.W. Hendel (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1955), 151.

[67] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 586.

[68] See, e.g., Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 338–65.

Nor were they unaware of this fact. The manner in which both Hume and Kant attempted to mute the implications of their conclusions is therefore revealing. Each explicitly frames what might otherwise appear to be a clear denial of long-held tenets of Christianity as, to the contrary, a defense of Christianity. Hume, for example, notes that he is especially "pleased with the method of reasoning here delivered, as I think it may serve to confound those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the *Christian religion* who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason." His rationale for thus thinking, he explains, is that "[o]ur most holy religion is founded on *faith*, not on reason; and it is a sure method of exposing it to put it to such a trial as it is by no means fitted to endure."[69] Though there is little doubt that Hume's pious claim to be defending the priority of faith over reason is disingenuous and self-serving, it is precisely the same claim forwarded also by Kant, who claimed that he "had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith."[70]

By framing their rejections of the natural knowledge of God as defenses of faith, both Hume and Kant made their conclusions attractive even to those otherwise hostile to the Enlightenment's often reductionist treatment of religious knowledge. Partially for this reason, the church's long consensus on natural knowledge began to dissolve, resulting in the subject becoming "one of the great crisis points of theological discussion" in the twentieth century.[71] It is thus to the twentieth-century discussion that some attention is now given.

B. The "Reformed Objection"

Immediately noteworthy in many of the most prominent modern rejections of the natural knowledge of God are their echoes of Hume's and Kant's claims to do so only in the interests of faith. Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) provides one example of this pitting of faith against knowledge in his famous attempt to "demythologize" Christianity. In denying both natural and supernatural (i.e., miraculous) evidence as revelation capable of providing knowledge of God, Bultmann claims that he merely upholds Paul's and Luther's confession of justification by faith alone. His program, he argues, is nothing other than the "application of the doctrine of justification by faith to the sphere of knowledge."[72] Thus he can also assert:

> For Protestant theology, such a natural theology is impossible. Not only, nor even primarily, because philosophical criticism has shown the impossibility of giving a proof of God, but especially

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[69] Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 139–40; emphases in original.

[70] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 117. Such pious sounding claims have sometimes prompted the imputation of a distinctly Lutheran bent to Kant's philosophy, as, e.g., in the claim that "Kant began where Luther began," and that "his conclusion in *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) would seem to be pure Luther." David M. Hockenbery, "Introduction," in *The Devil's Whore: Reason and Philosophy in the Lutheran Tradition*, ed. Jennifer Hockenbery Dragseth (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 8.

[71] Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, 6.

[72] Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 84.

> because this view of natural theology ignores the truth that the only possible access to God is faith.[73]

Much more influential in this regard, however, is the early twentieth-century Reformed theologian who consciously developed his thought in antithesis to the "liberal" theology culminating in figures such as Bultmann: Karl Barth (1886–1968). Though championing a "neo-orthodoxy" in opposition to the liberalism of his European contemporaries, Barth was not only out of step with the "old" orthodoxy; he was of one mind with many of his own opponents on the question of natural knowledge, and ostensibly for the same reasons. Not unlike Bultmann's appeal to Luther, for example, Barth will claim that "the Reformation and the teaching of the Reformation churches stand in an antithesis to 'Natural Theology'."[74]

Critics of Barth's position, though, have rightly noted problems with such a claim. The first is simply that Barth himself was well aware that the reformers in fact endorse a natural knowledge of God, and even a minimal place for a natural theology; thus he can only appeal to "the principle of the Reformation rather than to its execution, to a theoretical Reformation rather than the one that actually took place, to what the Reformed Churches ought to have done rather than to what they did in fact do."[75] As a result,

> When Barth says, "[a]s a Reformed theologian I am subject to an ordinance which would keep me away from 'Natural Theology' even if my personal opinions inclined me to it," we must conclude that he speaks as a new brand of Reformed theologian.[76]

Moreover, even those speaking in defense of Barth on this point are willing to acknowledge that it is not so much the reformers who stand behind Barth's position; instead, "Kant remains in the background."[77] Thus, even in his treatment of Romans 1:20, the text most frequently cited in support of man's natural knowledge of God, Barth lays particular stress on God's invisibility: "What is clearly seen to be indisputable reality is the invisibility of

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[73] Rudolf Bultmann, "The Problem of 'Natural Theology'," in *Faith and Understanding: I*, ed. R.W. Funk, trans. L.P. Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 313.

[74] Karl Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God according to the Teaching of the Reformation*, trans. J.L.M. Haire and Ian Henderson (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938), 8.

[75] Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology*, 8. Barth's contemporary, the Lutheran theologian Hermann Sasse, presses this point even further. Speaking of Barth's rejection of natural theology, he observes that "neither Lutheran nor Reformed theology has been able to adopt it, and this for the simple reason that the so-called Thomism, which the Reformers are supposed to have retained, was already present in the New Testament." Hermann Sasse, *Here We Stand: Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1979), 166.

[76] Michael Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology* (Farney: Ashgate, 2009), 46.

[77] Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), 144.

God. . . . And what does this mean but that we can know nothing of God?"[78] Replacing the rhetorical question with a more emphatic declaration, he bluntly asserts that "[t]he power of God can be detected neither in the world of nature nor in the souls of men."[79] Firmly believing this to be the case, Barth could only describe himself as "an avowed opponent of all natural theology,"[80] often expressing this opposition in the most forceful terms.[81]

It must be noted, however, that Barth's forceful rejections of both natural knowledge and natural theology rest, at least in part, on his own novel definitions of each. Contrary to theologians of the Reformation as well as the Middle Ages, he refers to natural knowledge, for example, as "a knowledge of which man as man is the master."[82] More novel still is his definition of natural theology, which he describes as "the doctrine of a *union of man with God* existing outside God's revelation in Jesus Christ."[83] To recognize the novelty of such conceptions is to recognize that Barth rejects what, in fact, none of his orthodox predecessors had acknowledged or defended.[84] Barth's novelty, though, appears to have gone largely unrecognized, especially among his more recent Reformed successors. Thus, contemporary Christian objections to natural theology are most prominently, though by no means exclusively, formulated and expressed by representatives of the Reformed, or Calvinist, tradition. Theologians and philosophers within this tradition note, for example, that "[c]haracteristic of the Continental Calvinist tradition has been a revulsion

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[78] Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 46–7.

[79] Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 36. In a heated exchange, Barth's fellow Swiss theologian Emil Brunner (1889–1966) appealed to the first two chapters of the very epistle upon which Barth had commented, insisting that "Barth simply refuses to follow St. Paul here." Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the reply "No!" by Dr. Karl Barth*, tr. Peter Fraenkel (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 61. Noting Barth's professed adherence to Scripture alone, Brunner further remarks that, since Scripture so consistently asserts that the Creator is known via his creation, "it seems to me a queer kind of loyalty to Scripture to demand that such a revelation should not be acknowledged" (25).

[80] Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*, 6.

[81] See, e.g., Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 75: "[O]ne can bypass so-called natural theology only as one would pass by an abyss into which it is inadvisable to step if one does not want to fall." Similarly, in the penultimate sentence of the same work: "Only the theology and the church of the antichrist can profit from it" (128).

[82] Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*, 7. Cf., however, Reformed theologian G.C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 61, who rightly acknowledges that even among Roman Catholic theologians natural theology "does not pretend to be an *autonomous* theology."

[83] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 2/1, ed. G.W. Bromily and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 168; emphasis added.

[84] That is, Barth attacks "straw men." Brunner hints that Barth may be guilty of a further logical fallacy (the genetic fallacy) when he notes that Barth's rejection of natural theology is also partially predicated on the charge that it is "Thomistic and Roman Catholic" as well as "derived from the Enlightenment." Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 21.

against arguments in favor of theism,"[85] and that, with reference to natural theology, "the Reformed attitude has ranged from indifference, through suspicion and hostility, to outright accusations of blasphemy."[86]

Though the stated reasons for this "Reformed objection" vary,[87] it has accurately been noted that the objection itself has become prominent only in the twentieth century, and especially within the Dutch "neo-Calvinist" school of Reformed theology. In this light, other Reformed theologians have been willing to suggest that "the 'Reformed objection' to natural theology, as characterized by twentieth-century philosophers of religion, simply did not exist before they invented it."[88] Moreover, some unexpected sources contributing to this "invention" have been suggested. Among modern Reformed critics, "several of them appeal explicitly to Hume and Kant"; indeed, "[t]he dependence on Hume and Kant is one of the striking features of the criticisms of the logic of theistic arguments by Reformed thinkers."[89] To the extent that this is the case, it further indicates that influential strains of Enlightenment thought were not the culmination of biblical, confessional, and dogmatic affirmations of natural revelation, natural knowledge, and natural theology, but were rather the origins of their modern rejection.

Such a conclusion should not, however, prompt an embrace of the "genetic fallacy"—the rejection of an idea or position solely on the basis of its origins. Though it may indeed be significant that modern rejections of natural theology and the natural knowledge of God most prominently originate among Enlightenment philosophers and Reformed theologians, far more significant from a Lutheran perspective is simply that these positions—whatever their origins—stand in opposition to historical Lutheranism's dogmatic, confessional, and exegetical conclusions. This is not, however, to say that the Enlightenment and Reformed critiques are entirely without merit. Indeed, a number of the points raised especially in these critiques deserve thoughtful consideration by all Christians desirous of appealing to God's natural revelation and man's natural reason in evangelistic endeavors. Following a brief excursus on natural law, then, some of these points will be addressed below.

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[85] Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Introduction," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, (Notre Dame:University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 7.

[86] Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 54 (1980), 49.

[87] See, e.g., the brief summaries in Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology*, 5, and Evans, "Apologetics in a New Key," 66.

[88] Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology*, 45; see also 113–18 and the sources there cited for Sudduth's demonstration that John Calvin himself cannot be claimed as the source of modern Reformed objections.

[89] Sudduth, *The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology*, 171 and 204.

C. Excursus on Natural Law

Though it has not been explicitly addressed in the foregoing, any examination of natural revelation, natural knowledge, and natural theology cannot ignore the related topic of natural law. This relationship, for example, is at least implicitly acknowledged even in Luther's above-noted conception of the natural knowledge of God being a "legal" knowledge of the divine. Similarly, but even more explicitly observing the association of natural knowledge and natural law, the Confessions declare that even the "pagans had something of a knowledge of God from the law of nature."[90] Thus even modern Lutheran commentators have rightly suggested that there is "an inseparable connection which exists between natural theology and Natural Law."[91] It is precisely for this reason, however, that the patterns of acknowledgement and rejection outlined above repeat themselves in modern Christian discussions of natural law.

Such parallels become immediately evident, for instance, in readings of that New Testament passage most frequently cited as the clearest biblical statement on natural law, which, not coincidentally, appears in the context of St. Paul's broader elucidation of God's natural revelation and man's natural knowledge of him (Romans 1:18–2:16). As with his affirmation of man's natural knowledge of God, Paul's affirmation of the natural law—and man's awareness of it—appears unambiguous. He writes:

> For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them. (Romans 2:14–15)

Nonetheless, the avoidance of any discussion of natural law in many studies of New Testament ethics would seem to betray a common belief that there is no New Testament acknowledgement of natural law.[92] More pointedly expressing this belief are assertions such as the following: "That scholars should ever have tried to discover the Platonic or Stoic idea of natural law in the Bible is one of the most amazing facts in the history of theology."[93]

Despite such intimations, however, the "plain reading" of Paul on natural law—as with Paul on natural knowledge more generally—has been and

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[90] FC SD 5.22.

[91] Robert Hoeferkamp, "Natural Law and the New Testament," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 23 (1952), 648.

[92] Matthew Levering, *Biblical Natural Law: A Theocentric and Theological Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 24. On the following page Levering also notes Barth's influence in this respect, paralleling his influence on questions of natural theology more generally.

[93] Otto Piper, "What is Natural Law?" *Theology Today* 2 (1946), 461. As discussed briefly below, however, an important distinction must be recognized between any "fact" and "theory" of natural law. Thus, to say that Scripture contains no particularly "Platonic or Stoic idea of natural law" is not necessarily to say that Scripture refuses to recognize the reality of natural law.

remains the most common, and most warranted, reading. Moreover, and again in common with the biblical evidence for a natural knowledge of God, the clearest and most frequently cited passage is by no means the only biblical evidence to which one might appeal.[94] Even in the Old Testament, for example, it has been observed that "[t]he nations are condemned in Amos 1:3–2:3 because of their violation of Yahweh's general revelation or natural law."[95] Similarly, the divine declaration of Deuteronomy 4:6, that even Israel's neighbors would recognize her laws as especially wise and good, is implicitly revealing. As one commentator notes: "that those who are not people of God can make such a determination successfully means that the laws are understood to conform to a standard other than 'God said so'" in his special revelation.[96]

On the basis of the biblical witness, the Lutheran Confessions too profess that "to some extent human reason naturally understands it [i.e., the law] since reason contains the same judgment divinely written on the mind."[97] Reiterating the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* on this point, and again echoing Romans 2:14–15, the *Formula of Concord* also confesses that "this law of God was written into the heart."[98] Similarly, the *Formula* not only connects this natural knowledge of the law with the natural knowledge of God by referring to each together, observing, for instance, that fallen men retain the "dim spark of knowledge that a god exists (as Romans 1[:19–21, 24, 32] states), or of the teaching of the law";[99] as noted above, it also binds them much more intimately by asserting specifically that even pagans have "a knowledge of God *from* the law of nature."[100]

That some knowledge of the natural law is not only a fact of human nature, "written on the heart" of all, but that it thus also serves as a basis for the knowledge of God himself is a point similarly highlighted by Luther. Thus he, too, can write that man has "a left-handed and a partial knowledge

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[94] For overviews of the biblical material, see, e.g., Levering, *Biblical Natural Law*, and David VanDrunen, *A Biblical Case for Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute, 2006).

[95] Reed Lessing, *Amos* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009), 94. As Lessing further explains on the following page: "The prophet appeals to an innate order about human conduct that is—or should be—evident to all people as good and right," and "the nations are not denounced for sins that they could not have been expected to recognize."

[96] Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 137. It is, however, worth noting here that, while even Israel's neighbors can *recognize* the superiority of her law, that which *makes* it superior is its divine origin and special revelation.

[97] Ap 4.7.

[98] FC Ep 6.2. Roland Ziegler, "Natural Law in the Lutheran Confessions," in *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal*, ed. Robert C. Baker (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 7, notes that the Confessions never explicitly quote Romans 2:14–15, but that such references to the law being "written on the heart" clearly have this passage in view. See also, e.g., LC 2.67.

[99] FC SD 2.9.

[100] FC SD 5.22, emphasis added.

of God, based on the law of nature and of Moses."[101] This reference to Moses further highlights a repeated emphasis of Luther, as well as the later Lutheran dogmaticians. A natural knowledge of God was not only confessed by the reformers, but the broad outline of its content was also noted. The same is true with their commentary on natural law: the fact of natural law is not only asserted, but its content is briefly summarized with reference to Moses, that is, the Ten Commandments given to Israel through Moses. It is with reference to these commandments that Luther, for example, can proclaim that "Moses agrees exactly with nature,"[102] and that "the natural laws were never so orderly and well written as by Moses."[103] The same point is expressed not only in the Confessions,[104] but also by the later dogmaticians,[105] who can speak of "some knowledge of the divine law pertaining to the remnants of the original divine image."[106]

As with the doctrine of the natural knowledge of God, the teaching of a natural law accessible to all men was deemed by the reformers to be plainly taught in Scripture, and so embraced and asserted in their own exegetical, confessional, and dogmatic works. The question thus arises concerning the reasons for the long neglect of, and even outright hostility towards, this teaching among more recent Protestants, including sometimes even Lutherans. As with the doctrine of the natural knowledge of God, it has been rightly noted that, "[h]owever deeply entrenched the bias against natural law thinking is among Protestant thinkers, it cannot be attributed to the Reformers of the sixteenth century themselves."[107] As with the natural knowledge of God, "[t]he pressure to abandon the teaching of natural law stemmed not so much from the Reformation as from post-Enlightenment developments in philosophy."[108] This point being insufficiently recognized, much twentieth-century Protestant thinking

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[101] Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*, AE 22:153.

[102] Martin Luther, *How Christians Should Regard Moses* (1525), AE 35:168.

[103] Martin Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments* (1525), AE 40:98. On this point, see also the whole of Luther, *How Christians Should Regard Moses*.

[104] Ap 4.7 (German), notes, e.g., that "natural law, which agrees with the Mosaic Law, or the Ten Commandments, is innate in the heart of all men and is written on it."

[105] E.g., David Hollaz: "The law of Sinai is a sort of epitome of the natural Law." Hollaz, *Examen Theologiae Acroamaticae* (1707), quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, "Natural Theology in David Hollaz," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 18 (1947), 262.

[106] Johann Gerhard, *Loci Theologici* (1610–1622), in Herman A. Preus and Edmund Smits (eds), *The Doctrine of Man in Classical Lutheran Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1962), 41; cf. also FC Ep 6.2.

[107] J. Daryl Charles, "Protestants and Natural Law," *First Things* (December 2006), 33; cf. Carl E. Braaten, "Protestants and Natural Law," *First Things* (January 1992), 24, who also notes that "none of the confessional documents of the Reformation, neither those of the Lutheran nor of the Calvinist tradition, rejected the notion of natural law."

[108] Braaten, "Protestants and Natural Law," 22.

about natural law echoed neither Scripture nor the reformers, but "generally mirrored the Enlightenment culture around it."[109]

Still, and again, in common with many modern treatments of the natural knowledge of God, there is no small irony here, as some of those who most forcefully reject natural law do so largely because they deem it "a central doctrine of the Enlightenment,"[110] and "one of the principal factors in the formation of the modern spirit."[111] It is certainly true that some thinkers of the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment era (as in the pre-Christian era) developed "theories" of natural law different from those of the reformers and other Christian theologians; it is also true that these new "rationalist" theories were less amenable, sometimes even contrary, to orthodox Christianity.[112] Nonetheless, a distinction should be recognized between natural law as a "fact" and any "theory" purporting to explain it; just as with the central Christian doctrine of the atonement, for example, one might object to certain "theories" of the atonement while at the same time clearly confessing and defending the atonement itself as a sure fact.

Moreover, while it is true that some Enlightenment thinkers were developing novel theories of natural law, it is also the case that other influential representatives of the age were consciously attempting to undermine natural law both as theory and as fact. Given the intimate relations between natural theology and natural law, it is perhaps not surprising that David Hume, for instance, would object to the latter as forcefully as he did to the former. He does so most famously in the third book ("Of Morals") of his *Treatise of Human Nature*, where he develops the argument that moral truths are incapable of being discerned by human reason. It is in this context that he lays down what is sometimes referred to as "Hume's Law," often summarized as: "Ought cannot be derived from is."[113] That is, according to Hume, morality cannot be ultimately grounded or rationally discovered in any objective, unchanging reality, whether that be the nature of the universe, of man, or of God himself.

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[109] Charles, "Protestants and Natural Law," 35.

[110] August Lang, "The Reformation and Natural Law," in *Calvin and the Reformation*, ed. William Park Armstrong (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 93.

[111] Lang, "The Reformation and Natural Law," 58. Lang is, however, ecumenical in providing a rationale for his condemnation, noting also on the same page that natural law thinking arose "in Catholicism (and hence in false belief)." As noted above, other Christian rejections of natural law are also sometimes predicated on its supposedly deriving from pre-Christian pagan philosophy.

[112] The Dutch Arminian Hugo Grotius (1583–1645), for example, is often considered to have inaugurated those "modern" and "rationalist" natural law theories that would predominate throughout the Enlightenment; in this context he is often quoted for his claim that the principles of natural law would remain valid "even if we were to suppose (what we cannot suppose without the greatest wickedness) that there is no God." Hugo Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, 3 vols, ed. Richard Tuck (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005), "Prolegomena to the First Edition," 3:1748.

[113] See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner (New York: Penguin, 1969), 521.

Instead, it is "but a sum of societary conventions that are adapted to serve human needs and urges according to our experiences, which, however, may be superseded by different experiences at some future time."[114] This influential denial of natural law, the cornerstone of much legal and ethical thought from antiquity through early modernity, was especially significant in facilitating the rise to prominence of the more subjective and "utilitarian" moralities representative of the modern era.[115]

In this light, what became evident with respect to natural theology appears also to be paralleled with regard to natural law: in their rejection of natural law, many contemporary Protestants find themselves, perhaps unwittingly, rejecting the conclusions of Scripture, Confessions, and orthodox dogmatics, and instead aligning themselves with critiques set forth by skeptical Enlightenment philosophers. Yet, as similarly noted above with respect to natural theology, this is not to say that all objections to natural law, especially those raised by concerned Christians, are entirely without merit. As with the critiques of natural theology, these concerns deserve some thoughtful attention by any who would make use of natural law in faithful Christian witness to the contemporary world. Given the "inseparable connection" between natural law and natural theology, then, further concerns regarding the validity of each are given some attention below.

D. The Legitimacy and Limitations of Natural Theology

Though by no means exhaustive, the preceding sections sufficiently reveal that the authors of Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and the orthodox dogmatics are in agreement concerning the legitimacy of natural theology and the related matters of natural revelation, natural knowledge of God, and natural law. At various points, however, their agreement that each also has its limitations was likewise observed. Most often and most emphatically, the biblical, confessional, and dogmatic authors are quite clear that a natural knowledge of God is entirely insufficient for salvation. As was rhetorically asked in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, "[i]f we can be justified through reason and the works of reason, why do we need Christ or regeneration?"[116] Even more plainly, dogmatician Johannes Quenstedt insisted that "[t]he natural knowledge of God is not adequate to secure everlasting life, nor has any mortal ever been redeemed, nor can any one ever be redeemed, by it alone."[117] Because a natural knowledge of God does not and cannot encompass a

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[114] Heinrich A. Rommen, *The Natural Law: A Study in Legal and Social History and Philosophy*, trans. Thomas R. Hanley (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), 100.

[115] So, e.g., Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), the "father" of utilitarianism, specifically credits Hume's *Treatise* as decisively demonstrating for him that "the foundations of all *virtue* are laid in *utility*." Quoted in Ernest C. Mosser, "Introduction" to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 25; emphases in original.

[116] Ap 4.12.

[117] Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica*, quoted in Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 110.

knowledge of the saving gospel—revealed only in Christ and his word—its use and benefits remain limited to what is frequently referred to as God's "left-hand kingdom," that which is governed by reason and law.[118]

Unfortunately, however, critics of natural theology are not incorrect in noting that such distinctions are not always carefully made. Nor are they wrong in suspecting that the use of natural theology is always prone to abuse. This was evident, for example, in the above-noted Deistic reduction of natural theology to a "natural religion" at odds with Christianity. More recently, and more unfortunately, even the Roman Catholic Church has officially denied that the limitations of natural theology and man's natural knowledge prevent its ever being a saving knowledge. Thus the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) decreed: "Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience."[119] Though the enshrining of this conclusion in an official decree may in some respects be unique to the Roman Catholic Church, the conclusion itself is not.[120] As the Lutheran Church's own confessional documents rightly note, given man's sinful nature, the temptation to abuse what natural knowledge we possess is ever present. The *Apology*, for instance, observes that, "through the law they seek the forgiveness of sins and justification" precisely "because to some extent human reason naturally understands it since reason contains the same judgment divinely written on the mind."[121]

In the light of this propensity of sinful human beings to seek justification on the basis of what may be known by reason alone, it is perhaps unsurprising that one of the most frequent criticisms of a natural theology is that it places too much confidence in human reason, failing to take seriously the damaging effects of sin upon it.[122] Indeed, even the Lutheran Confessions recognize that one consequence of sin is "being ignorant of God."[123] As detailed above, however, the confessors did not mean to imply by this that any and all knowledge of God is absent in the unbeliever; rather, while the unregenerate might—and should—recognize the existence of God, their beliefs about him will remain

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[118] On the "two kingdoms," see below at section IV, B.

[119] Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium (Dogmatic Constitution of the Church)*, 2.16, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), 35.

[120] Thus, already in the second century Justin Martyr (100–c. 165) could propose that "[t]hose who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them." Justin Martyr, *The First Apology of Justin Martyr*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 1:178.

[121] Ap 4.7.

[122] See, e.g., Evans, "Apologetics in a New Key," 66, and VanDrunen, *A Biblical Case for Natural Law*, 3–4.

[123] Ap 2.8.

either incomplete when measured against Scripture, or inconsistent with the God revealed in Scripture.[124]

This distinction between the knowledge of God derived from Holy Scripture and that acquired by means of reason alone has prompted many to refer to the latter as mere knowledge of the "God of the philosophers." Perhaps most famously, the French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) used this language in his "memorial," where he starkly contrasts the God of "philosophers and scholars" with the "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob."[125] Because the traditional arguments of natural theology can, at best, lead one only to a knowledge of the former, Pascal elsewhere dismisses them as entirely "useless."[126] Such a judgment, though, is dependent upon one's prior conception of the intended "use" of natural theology.[127] To be sure, insofar as one intends its use to provide a knowledge sufficient for salvation, there is no danger of exaggeration in pressing Pascal's conclusion even further: natural knowledge in such an instance is *worse* than useless; it is damning. The same may be said of those instances in which the "knowledge" acquired by reason alone is inconsistent with, or contrary to, the revealed testimony of Scripture. Thus, even while acknowledging the fact of man's natural knowledge of God, the Confessions likewise consistently acknowledge its strict limitations, and even potential dangers if unchecked by the biblical revelation. As previously noted in this regard, the Confessions do not so much stress the lack of natural knowledge about God as they do its falseness. The natural knowledge of God sets forth a distorted picture of Him. It is incapable of showing us the God who justifies and saves from sin.[128]

Whether the conclusions of natural theology are entirely "useless" where they do not contradict Scripture, yet remain (as they must) incomplete by

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[124] It is perhaps worth noting in this context, however, that both the history of heresy and the contemporary plethora of Christian denominations reveal that these shortcomings are not restricted to natural theology alone. The Latin dictum "*abusus non tollit usum*" (i.e., abuse is no argument against right use) remains applicable, whether in reference to natural theology or biblical theology.

[125] Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A.J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1995), 285. Pascal's "memorial" consists of a handwritten note, apparently describing an ecstatic personal experience, which was posthumously found sewn into the lining of his coat.

[126] Pascal, *Pensées*, 141 (fragment 449/556).

[127] Also, to distinguish between the "God of the philosophers" and the God of Scripture as if these necessarily cannot be one in the same is at least potentially problematic for any who grant that a natural knowledge of God may be true knowledge, even if incomplete knowledge. Peter Geach illustrates this point by means of analogy with a Sherlock Holmes murder investigation. On the basis of the evidence at the scene of death, Holmes might rightly conclude that a murder has occurred, and thus a murderer exists. Further, the evidence might allow him to compile a "profile" of the murderer. If such a profile led to the arrest of a particular individual, and if further, more specific evidence confirmed that this individual were indeed the murderer, "it would occur to nobody, I imagine, to distinguish between the abstract murderer of Sherlock Holmes' deductions and the real live murderer raging in his cell." Peter Geach, *God and the Soul* (London: Routledge, 1969), 113.

[128] Fagerberg, *A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions (1529–1537)*, 67.

comparison with it, remains a more contentious question. The incompleteness of natural knowledge is, quite obviously, one of its limitations; whether such a limitation renders it useless, however, again depends upon the manner in which its use is intended. One of David Hume's many critiques of natural theology, for example, was that its traditional arguments, even if capable of establishing the basic claim of a god's existence, fail to demonstrate that this god is infinite, perfectly good and wise, or even one being rather than many.[129] This influential argument, adopted even by many Christian critics of natural theology, asserts, in short, that any argument of natural theology, even if a valid and sound argument, does not prove enough.[130] The immediately relevant question, however, is: "enough *for what*?" Hume and others, whose criticism of natural theology is that it provides only an incomplete knowledge of God, are entirely correct if the point is simply that a wholly natural knowledge of God cannot be a knowledge of "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." This indeed is one of natural theology's limitations. It is, however, a limitation almost universally recognized by natural theology's proponents.[131] That is to say, the critique loses its force once it is understood that the intent of natural theology is not to demonstrate that whatever is confessed of God on the basis of divine revelation can also be known by reason alone. Indeed, some proponents of natural theology are content with the modest claim that its arguments neither "prove" the most fundamental claim of God's existence, nor even produce overwhelming evidence in favor of this basic claim, but merely provide "support" for it.[132] At least in dialogue with an individual who assumes there can be no rational support for belief in the existence of a deity, even such a modest role for natural theology might be deemed useful by some.[133]

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[129] See especially, e.g., Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Book V.

[130] See James F. Sennett, "Hume's Stopper and the Natural Theology Project," in *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment*, ed. James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 82.

[131] See, e.g., C.S. Lewis' comment at the conclusion of his well-known "moral argument" for the existence of God as set forth in Book I of *Mere Christianity*: "Do not think I am going faster than I really am. I am not yet within a hundred miles of the God of Christian theology." C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 25.

[132] James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis, "Hume's Legacy and Natural Theology," in *In Defense of Natural Theology: A Post-Humean Assessment*, ed. James F. Sennett and Douglas Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 15–16. This language of "support," calling to mind a buttressing or propping up, may be especially relevant for those confessing that a natural knowledge of God may not only be acquired, but is in fact innate; that is, the arguments of natural theology need not produce a knowledge of God from scratch, but may simply provide support for an already existing, though weak or suppressed, knowledge.

[133] Offering an analogy to "candidate moves" in the game of chess, James Sennett suggests the possibility also of a slightly less modest use of natural theology. While still admitting that arguments from reason alone do not prove the existence of the God of Christianity—or even of classical theism—he offers that they might sufficiently convince one of the existence of a divine being with certain characteristics or attributes. If so, such arguments might serve to narrow the range of "candidate gods" to those sharing such characteristics. That is, while not actually dem-

Others, though, object even to this modest role for natural theology, finding it also not only useless, but inherently dangerous. Any appeal to reason, it is claimed, invariably implies that human nature and human reason—rather than God and his word—are ultimately autonomous and authoritative. Any appeal to natural law is thus rejected because "[s]uch a morality is by definition self-sufficient."[134] Natural theology is similarly dismissed as being the source of "a knowledge of which man as man is the master."[135] Such conclusions, though, appear to misunderstand the manner in which the term "natural" operates in traditionally qualifying such words as law, theology, or knowledge. Unlike the contemporary usage influenced by popular interpretations of modern science, which tends to understand "natural" as entirely excluding the supernatural, the traditional description of a certain law or knowledge as natural in no way implies the rejection of its supernatural origins. With respect to natural law, for instance, the old Lutheran theologians took great pains to emphasize this point. In the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* Melanchthon thus refers to the natural law as a "creation or divine ordinance in the human creature,"[136] and as a judgment "divinely written on the mind."[137] Elsewhere he is even more explicit, insisting that "[t]his knowledge is not the product of our own mental powers, but it has been implanted in us by God,"[138] and that "'by nature' really signifies something created by God."[139]

Nor are confessional Lutherans alone in this understanding. Even Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), sometimes characterized as the medieval "rationalist" *par excellence*, was quite adamant that "[h]uman reason is not, of itself, the rule of things,"[140] and that, "properly speaking, none imposes a law on his own actions."[141] In speaking of natural theology and the natural knowledge of God more generally, Aquinas is similarly eager to admit that:

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onstrating the existence of the God of Scripture, natural theology might persuade some that the God of Scripture is far more likely to be the true God than, say, the gods of Hesiod's *Theogony*.

[134] John L. McKenzie, S.J., "Natural Law in the New Testament," *Biblical Research* 9 (1964), 11.

[135] Barth, *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God*, 7.

[136] Ap 23.9.

[137] Ap 4.7.

[138] Philip Melanchthon, *Loci Communes* (1521), in *Melanchthon and Bucer*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 50.

[139] Philip Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans* (1540), trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 2010), 89.

[140] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947–48), First Part of the Second Part, question 91, article 3, *ad* 2.

[141] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, First Part of the Second Part, question 93, article 5. Thus, one modern commentator can write of Aquinas that "[n]atural law is never (and I must emphasize *never*) defined in terms of what is first in the (human) mind or first in nature." Russell Hittinger, "Natural Law and Catholic Moral Theology," in *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 6.

Even as regards those truths about God which human reason could have discovered, it was necessary that man should be taught by a divine revelation; because the truth about God such as reason could discover, would only be known by a few, and that after a long time, and with the admixture of many errors.[142]

This is a conclusion substantially echoed by Quenstedt, the orthodox Lutheran. While asserting, on the one hand, "[t]hat the natural knowledge of God is true, is evident from this, that the apostle expressly calls it truth, Rom 1:18 sq., and with the addition, the truth of God, v. 25," he also proceeds quickly to clarify that "we must distinguish between the natural knowledge of God, considered in and through itself, and in so far as it has united with it imperfection, corruption of reason, and a proclivity to various errors."[143]

Summarizing, then, with an eye to Quenstedt's own summary conclusion, the following might fairly be concluded. Because a natural knowledge of God may indeed be, within its limited scope, true knowledge, appeals to natural theology and natural law can be deemed not only legitimate, but also potentially useful. Because even a natural knowledge of God which is true must remain incomplete, however, its usefulness is greatly limited. For attaining salvation it does indeed remain useless—or worse—by itself. Moreover, because any knowledge of God attained by reason alone will invariably be tainted by "imperfection, corruption of reason, and a proclivity to various errors," it must not only remain incomplete knowledge, but will even quite often be false knowledge.

Even more concisely stated: a natural knowledge of God might *sometimes* be true, will *always* be incomplete, and will *never* suffice for salvation. Thus, where one's natural "knowledge" of God is false, it must be corrected by Scripture; and even where one's natural knowledge of God is true, yet incomplete, it must be supplemented by Scripture. Stated in this brief fashion, however, a reasonable question may be posed: If, even in a "best case" scenario, natural theology must give way to Scripture, why engage natural theology at all? Why not appeal immediately to those Scriptures "written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31)? These are the questions which the following section seeks to address.

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[142] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part I, question 1, article 1.

[143] Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica*, quoted in Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 108.

IV. Natural Knowledge and Christian Witness

> *Even those who deny that God is, still they are not ignorant that God is.* ~ Johannes Quenstedt[144]
>
> *The reasons why God imparted the external knowledge of Himself to the minds of all men are: (1) For the sake of external discipline, which God wished to be exercised by all men, even the unregenerate; (2) that God might be sought after (Acts 17:27–30); [. . . and . . .] (3) that He might render men inexcusable (Rom. 1:20).* ~ Martin Chemnitz[145]

A. Common Ground and Christian Witness

Thus far the examination of the biblical, confessional, and dogmatic treatment of the natural knowledge of God—as well as various historical and contemporary rejections of it—has proceeded by treating the subject largely in, of, and by itself. Consequently, the impression might be given that such an investigation's primary concern is the question of what the non-Christian might come to know of God in, of, and by *himself*. The questions and concerns which gave rise to this study, though, were not prompted by a merely academic curiosity. They were prompted, instead, by the conviction that such a study might have practical "implications for our public witness," and, more specifically, that it might "assist the members of the congregations of the LCMS in their witness."[146]

Before proceeding to a discussion of such practical implications and potential assistance, however, it is worth pausing briefly to suggest that these emphases on natural knowledge in the specific context of Christian witness perhaps shed further light on some of the confusions and contentions noted in previous sections. Insofar as the focus remains on the abstract question of what knowledge might be naturally attainable by a hypothetical unbeliever entirely ignorant of God's special revelation in Scripture, answers may well vary; but they will remain "academic" and "impractical." That is, the orthodox Christian will conclude that whatever knowledge is naturally attainable by the solitary unbeliever is impractical, indeed useless, for acquiring salvation. As the concerns prompting this study make plain, however, and as most treatments of natural theology regularly reveal, attention is not primarily focused on the solitary unbeliever in, of, and by himself. It is instead focused especially on those unbelievers with whom Christians are in dialogue and to whom Christians witness. In this context, it might be said that some awareness

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[144] Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica*, Part 1, chapter 6, section 2, question 1 (Leipzig, 1715), 373–74.

[145] Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici* (1591), quoted in Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 110.

[146] Resolution 3-04A, *2007 Convention Proceedings*, 121.

of God's natural revelation, some understanding of the natural knowledge of God and his law, and some facility with natural theology are indeed potentially useful—not in the first instance for the unbeliever, but for the Christian engaged in witnessing to him or her. Each might, in such a view, be seen in some respects as "tools" in the hands of the Christian evangelist. The utility of any tool, however, presupposes its proper use. To press the analogy further, the right use of any tool further presumes an awareness of its intended purpose, its inherent capacities, and its inevitable limitations.

As the above pages have consistently highlighted that the most significant limitation of natural theology is that a natural knowledge of God does not, and cannot, extend to a knowledge of the gospel, it will thus be clear that gospel proclamation *per se* is not the immediately intended purpose of natural theology. Instead, in the context of Christian witness, the purpose of appeals to natural revelation, natural law, and natural theology have traditionally been understood as preliminary or preparatory to the proclamation and elucidation of the gospel.[147] Often, for example, this preparatory task is described in terms of an attempt to establish "common ground" or a "point of contact" between the Christian and non-Christian.

Though the apostles, and Christ himself, are never described in the pages of the New Testament as engaging in evangelistic witness to those who might be recognized as atheists or even agnostics in modern terms, it remains clear that their witness to non-Christians regularly proceeds from some assumed or established common ground. Apostolic testimony in the Hebraic milieu, for instance, frequently began by meeting the Jews "where they were"—quite literally in those cases of proclamation within Mediterranean synagogues, but also more generally in appeals to the shared authority of the Hebrew scriptures and the shared belief in a promised Messiah.[148] Though the analogue with natural theology here is obviously inexact—the Old Testament being specially, rather than naturally, revealed, and the expectation of a Messiah being predicated on this special revelation—it is nonetheless noteworthy that the apostles regularly proceed from those authorities and beliefs acknowledged by their audiences, and which they often hold in common with their audiences. Further, this common ground often allows the apostolic proclamation to progress logically and rhetorically from that which a given audience *does* know to that which it therefore *should* know.[149]

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[147] E.g., in a letter explaining the intent of the BBC radio broadcasts which would eventually become, in published form, the early chapters of *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis described his argument for and from a natural knowledge of the law as "*praeparatio evangelica* rather than *evangelium*." C.S. Lewis, *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. Walter Hooper, 3 vols (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), 2:484. As will be noted below, however, to speak of "preparation" need not imply a necessary chronological priority.

[148] See, for example, Peter's proclamation at Pentecost (Acts 2:14–36), Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–35), and Paul's testimony in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:13–43).

[149] The sermons of Peter in Jerusalem and Paul in Pisidian Antioch are again illustrative. Each refers, for example, to King David's confession that "you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or

Especially illustrative and so often cited in this regard is the apostle Paul's Areopagus proclamation (Acts 17:22–31), which, addressed to those who did not recognize the authority of God's special revelation, is also a closer analogue to much modern Christian evangelism. Before further examination of this proclamation itself, however, two preliminary considerations deserve recognition. The first is simply that, while the Areopagus speech itself begins "where the Athenians are" (namely, with reference to their own gods), this is not the point at which Paul's preaching in Athens more broadly begins. Rather, it had begun with Paul's proclamation, in the synagogue and in the marketplace, of Christ and his bodily resurrection from death—a point on which he and his more philosophically inclined hearers decidedly did not share common ground (cf. Acts 17:18 and 17:32). It is the very peculiarity of this preaching which prompts some among Paul's audience to request that he speak to them further, prompting his later Areopagus address. This order of events is significant in that it makes plain that appeals to the non-Christian's own beliefs, assumptions, or authorities, while potentially helpful, need not be given any chronological priority in Christian witness. As Paul himself does in Athens, one might—and perhaps even should—begin with the proclamation of the gospel itself, strange as it may sound to one's hearers. As curiosity is piqued, or as objections arise, a shift to some recognized point of contact might then be deemed appropriate.

A further preliminary point deserving recognition is that, even in Paul's own establishment of a point of contact with his audience, there is no indication that all of the Athenian beliefs to which he initially appeals are deemed by the apostle to be either true or good. Quite the contrary; Luke specifically records that, upon observing the many idols of Athens, Paul was "provoked" (Acts 17:16). And yet it is also noteworthy that, in addressing his idolatrous audience, he does not immediately, or at all, appeal to biblical prohibitions against graven images (e.g., Ex. 20:4) or to the biblical confession that God is one (e.g., Deut. 6:4). Rather than quoting that special revelation which his audience neither possesses nor recognizes as authoritative, Paul instead highlights that which his hearers already do know and accept.

With regard to the content of Paul's address itself, that which he emphasizes as already known and understood by his hearers is readily apparent. They accept, for instance, the fundamental importance of religion in general (v. 22). They understand that they nevertheless lack some knowledge of the divine, as evidenced by their altar "To the unknown god" (v. 23). They understand that there exists a deity in whom "we live and move and have our being," and that "we are indeed his offspring" (v. 28). Thus quoting their own authors to them, Paul effectively transitions from what his non-Christian hearers *do* know to what they therefore *should* know. "Being then God's offspring," he

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let your holy one see corruption" (Psalm 16:10), while also observing that David "both died and was buried" (Acts 2:29), that he "was laid with his fathers and saw corruption" (Acts 13:36). Because their audiences *did* know these things, they also *should* have known that David spoke prophetically of another.

proclaims, "we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man" (v. 29). Revealing their logically untenable conceptions of the divine, Paul can then call their "knowledge" what it in fact is: "ignorance" (v. 30). He can thus call upon them to repent of their false worship, and can finally draw their attention once again to the "man whom [God] has appointed," and through whom "he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (v. 31).

If such apostolic approaches to Christian witness are recognized at least as exemplary—though not necessarily normative—the question raised for the contemporary Christian concerns the manner in which some common ground or point of contact might be established with modern unbelievers. While a virtually infinite number of specific contexts in which personal evangelism might take place will preclude any attempt to address such a question with specific details, some general observations might be offered on the basis of Scripture itself, as well as in light of the broader contours of modern culture.

Most fundamentally, though perhaps least obviously, the biblical attestation of a universally possessed natural knowledge of God reveals that there exists already, regardless of context, a commonly shared knowledge of God's existence. It is this biblical testimony, for instance, that informs the assertion of Johannes Quenstedt quoted above: "Even those who deny that God is, still they are not ignorant that God is."[150] It would of course hardly be prudent in conversation with professed atheists, for example, to imply that they are simply lying about their disbelief. Nonetheless, the Christian's trust in the scriptural confession that all men do in some respect and to some extent recognize God's existence—and only succeed in denying it by actively suppressing this truth (Rom. 1:18)—might inspire some confidence in the often daunting task of sharing one's faith with professed unbelievers. As even one recent survey of scientific studies examining the belief-forming mechanisms of the human mind concludes, "when atheism does battle with supernaturalism over the hearts and minds of people, the playing field is not level from the beginning."[151] It is also noteworthy in this regard that some prominent skeptics seem to recognize this as true. One skeptic laments, for example, that "our brains seem predisposed" and are "entirely accustomed to the idea that complex elegance is an indicator of premeditated, crafted design," such

[150] A similar claim is made, e.g., by dogmatician David Hollaz (1648–1713), who refers to atheists being so "not speculatively, but practically." That is, they may live as if there is no God, but to some extent they still understand that there is a God. Hollaz, *Examen Theologiae Acroamaticae*, quoted in Pelikan, "Natural Theology in David Hollaz," 260.

[151] Justin L. Barrett, *Born Believers: The Science of Children's Religious Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 218–19. Though Barrett provides no information on the religion (or lack thereof) of the various researchers whose work he surveys and summarizes, it is worth emphasizing that the many studies he cites appear in peer-reviewed academic journals not typically known to be biased in favor of religious belief.

that the evidences of the natural world "overwhelmingly impress us with the appearance of design as if by a master watchmaker."[152]

On a practical level, the recognition that even the professed unbeliever does in fact possess some innate knowledge of God will serve as a reminder that the Christian evangelist need not "prove" God's existence. Understanding that a natural knowledge of God is being willfully suppressed, the Christian might instead focus his or her attention on questioning and challenging those beliefs which serve to suppress this knowledge. In this regard, too, it is noteworthy that even some prominent atheists can be quite candid about their own motives for denying God's existence, speaking in terms that come close to admissions of being willing actively to suppress belief. One atheist writes, for example: "I want atheism to be true…. It isn't just that I don't believe in God and, naturally, hope that I'm right in my belief. It's that I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that."[153]

Moreover, one should not lose sight of the fact that, despite recent growth in the number and percentage of those professing to be atheists or agnostics, and the increased attention they have received in the media, the vast majority even of non-Christians in America do in fact acknowledge God's existence.[154] Again, therefore, the task of establishing common ground need not be to "prove" the existence of God. Most opportunities for Christian witness will instead occur in conversation with those who, not unlike the Athenians of Paul's day, readily profess belief in *a* god—which might then, as it did for Paul, serve as a starting point for proclaiming the nature and work of the *true* God.

What has been said above concerning the natural knowledge of God is no less true with regard to man's natural knowledge of the law. That is, man's innate knowledge of the law, even when suppressed or distorted, constitutes some common ground shared by Christians and non-Christians alike. This biblical confession, highlighted especially by St. Paul (Rom. 2:14–15), informs, for example, Luther's observation that, "if the natural law were not written and inscribed by God on the heart, one would have to preach for a long time before the conscience was struck."[155] Though the manner in which this natural knowledge of the law might be appealed to in Christian witness will receive further, and more specific, attention below, it is worth noting here that the bare

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[152] Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: Norton, 1985), xii, 21. Indeed, this is one of the conclusions suggested by recent scientific studies, that children as well as "adults, even scientifically trained ones, possess a bias to favor purpose-based explanations," and that "we do not simply outgrow the tendency to see purpose in the world but have to learn to tamp it down through formal education, and even then, it comes sneaking out when we are not paying careful attention." Barrett, *Born Believers*, 54, 55.

[153] Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 130.

[154] Pew Research Center and The Pew Forum on Religions and Public Life, *"Nones" On the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation* (Released 9 October 2012), 9, 22, available online at http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf.

[155] Martin Luther, *Sermon on the Second Book of Moses* (1 October 1525), WA 16:447.

fact of such a knowledge is increasingly recognized even by non-Christians, and on non-revelatory grounds. "Recent scientific research on moral reasoning," for instance, "is beginning to converge on the idea that, from childhood, people have a basic set of moral instincts, a grammar, or intuitions" and that "[a]ll normally developing people have similar, basic moral intuitions."[156]

As the above reference to moral "reasoning" suggests, another point of contact between the Christian and the non-Christian is the shared human possession of reason itself. Given the Lutheran theological tradition's willingness to describe human reason both as a "bright light"[157] and as a "dim spark,"[158] however, particular contexts will necessarily dictate the extent and respects to which appeals to logic or reason are appropriate in Christian witness. Thus, for example, the Christian evangelist will want constantly to be aware that, "[t]hough the wisdom of the Gospel is a higher gift than human reason, it does not alter or nullify the God-implanted intelligence of the latter."[159]

Because this is the case, and because it is both the biblical and Lutheran confession that men not only possess an *innate* knowledge of God, but might also, by use of their reason, *acquire* some knowledge of God's existence and attributes, there will be occasions on which it is entirely appropriate to appeal to the skeptics' own rational faculties and to the evidence available to their senses. Indeed, such appeals may in some cases be especially appropriate not only because the capacity for reason is shared by all human beings, but also because it is often a pronounced conceit of skeptics that they are especially rational and that, conversely, Christians and others embrace a belief in God only because they are insufficiently so.[160] This is apparent, to cite only one example, in the suggestion of some prominent atheists and agnostics that they dub themselves the "brights,"[161] in not-so-subtle contrast to their allegedly "dim" religious contemporaries.

Finally, and particularly in the context of the modern western world, the particular species of reasoning that is scientific might also be particularly

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[156] Barrett, *Born Believers*, 121. Significantly, on the same page Barrett also notes: "One of these basic moral intuitions appears to be the belief that moral codes are absolute and unchangeable, whereas other norms are arbitrary and could be changed."

[157] Luther, *Lectures on Jonah*, AE 19:54.

[158] FC SD 2.9. On this point, also see Tom G.A. Hardt, "Natural Knowledge of God and Natural Law According to the Teaching of the Evangelical Lutheran Church," Lutheran Synod Quarterly 19 (1979), 8.

[159] Martin Luther, *Sermon on the Seventh Sunday after Trinity*, in *Sermons of Martin Luther*, 8 vols, ed. J.N. Lenker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 8:159.

[160] This is a point being made by critics of Christianity already as early as the second century, when, e.g., the Roman pagan Celsus (c. 177) asserted that Christians "are able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, and only slaves, women and little children" of their religious claims. Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 73.

[161] See Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 5.

relevant in attempts to establish common ground with unbelievers. This is especially the case since, as one atheist himself rightly notes, "[o]ne of the things atheists tend to believe is that modern science is on their side, whereas theism is in conflict with science."[162] Precisely because this is the case, those otherwise tempted to avoid discussions of religious belief, or to dismiss such belief as inherently irrational and lacking any empirical evidence, might be more amenable to dialogue in cases where such discussion is framed, at least partially or initially, by common scientific concerns such as evidence and induction, verification or falsification, and inference to the best explanation. Not only is science itself—popularly perceived as an unbiased and objective method of establishing certain truths—a potential point of contact between Christians and non-Christians, but it might also serve to reveal or establish further common ground. In revealing, for example, that "the natural architecture of human minds in ordinary environments makes belief in gods entirely expected,"[163] scientific studies provide even non-biblical support for the Christian confession of man's innate knowledge of God. Similarly, empirical data derived from research in such disciplines as biology, astronomy, and physics might prove fruitful conversation starters, raising the question of whether the apparent "design" of the universe suggests, or even requires, the existence of a transcendent designer.[164]

Again, this brief summary of potential "points of contact" with the unbeliever is only suggestive, and by no means exhaustive. The reference to science, rather than the arts, for example, is informed simply by the popular esteem in which science is held, and should certainly not be taken to imply that one is unlikely to find some common ground with reference to the literary or visual arts. Further, it bears repeating that even the successful establishment of some common ground or point of contact—while sometimes difficult enough in itself—remains merely a means to an end. A "legal knowledge" of God, like a knowledge of God's law itself, remains preliminary to or preparatory for the proclamation of the gospel, which will remain the ultimate goal of any distinctly and uniquely Christian witness.

B. Christian Witness and the Two Kingdoms

Because a natural knowledge of God and his law does not and cannot include a knowledge of the saving gospel, its proper use will remain restricted to what Lutherans have traditionally called the "left-hand" kingdom (or

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[162] Thomas Nagel, "A Philosopher Defends Religion," *The New York Review of Books* (27 September 2012), 62.

[163] Barrett, *Born Believers*, 4.

[164] The famous philosopher Antony Flew (1923–2010), for example, attributed his late conversion from atheism to theism to such a line of inquiry. See Gary R. Habermas, "My Pilgrimage from Atheism to Theism: An Exclusive Interview with Former British Atheist Professor Antony Flew," *Philosophia Christi* 6 (2004), 197–211.

realm) of God, rather than God's "right-hand" kingdom.[165] That is, natural knowledge finds its proper home in that realm in which God rules by means of reason, law, and those orders, institutions, and vocations through which he secures and preserves the penultimate good of temporal human flourishing. It has no proper home, however, in that realm in which God rules by means of the gospel alone, and where he communicates this gospel only by means of word and sacrament, for the sake of the ultimate good of the sinner's salvation. This, though, is not to say that natural revelation and the knowledge it provides, while situated in the left-hand kingdom, cannot in important ways beneficially serve the gospel and, thus, the right-hand kingdom of God.[166] With reference to man's natural knowledge of the law, for instance, it has been said with only slight exaggeration that, "[t]here is no salvation in this knowledge, but without it life would come to a halt. There would be nothing to be saved."[167] Thus, as noted at the head of this section, the early Lutheran dogmatician Martin Chemnitz (1522–1586) could name as the first of those "reasons why God imparted the external knowledge of Himself to the minds of all men," the divine concern for "external discipline, which God wished to be exercised by all men, even the unregenerate."[168] The maintenance of external discipline by which civil society is preserved, viewed in light of left-hand concerns, may be deemed a good in and of itself. Because the church's proclamation of the gospel takes place within society, however, it, too, is well served by the establishment and preservation of a just and well-ordered society.

The Christian, therefore, as a citizen simultaneously residing in both of God's two kingdoms, will necessarily be engaged by and with the concerns and ends of each. The immediately relevant question thus becomes: In what respects might the natural revelation of God and his law be of practical assistance in Christian witness which seeks to serve the goals or purposes of both the right- and left-hand realms of God?

Though no logical priority necessitates treating the concerns of the left-hand realm first, it is with respect to temporal and civic affairs that

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[165] For the development of Luther's own thinking about the two kingdoms or two realms, see, e.g., Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 314–324. For a concise and accessible introduction to its broader contemporary application, see, e.g., Gene Veith, *The Spirituality of the Cross: The Way of the First Evangelicals* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1999), 91–106.

[166] By way of analogy, e.g., knowledge of a foreign language is not saving knowledge of the gospel; language acquisition is thus understood to reside in the "left-hand" realm. And yet, especially for a foreign missionary, knowledge of the relevant language will greatly facilitate proclamation of the gospel. At an even more mundane level, keeping the churchyard mown saves no one; but allowing it to become an overgrown eyesore might dissuade visitors from attending, and thus hearing the gospel which does save.

[167] Carl E. Braaten, "A Response," to Russell Hittinger, "Natural Law and Catholic Moral Theology," in *A Preserving Grace: Protestants, Catholics, and Natural Law*, ed. Michael Cromartie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 37.

[168] Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, quoted in Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 110.

the Lutheran Confessions themselves most frequently address the subject of man's natural knowledge of God and his law. The *Formula of Concord* acknowledges, for example, that "[r]eason and the free will are capable of 'living honorably to a certain extent externally.'"[169] It can further assert that those "works that belong to the maintenance of outward discipline are also demanded of the unbelievers and unconverted and are performed by them," noting also that "such works are praiseworthy in the world's sight and are rewarded by God in this world with temporal benefits."[170] The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* not only speaks similarly with regard to natural reason's capability, "to a certain extent," to discern and direct right human behavior, but also with respect both to God's requirement of this "righteousness of reason" and his rewarding it with temporal benefits.[171] Indeed, so insistent are the confessors, when addressing the concerns of the left-hand realm, that man's natural reason is capable of and sufficient for discerning the law, they can even rebuff as "insane" the suggestion that civil society be governed by those laws specially revealed in Scripture.[172] Instead, they can go so far as to confess that "Aristotle wrote so eruditely about social ethics that nothing further needs to be added."[173]

Even outside of the confessional documents, the reformers consistently speak in a similar fashion, occasionally doing so even more emphatically. Speaking of the natural law, for example, Melanchthon can write of its principles that "these constitute the ground rules for all human activity,"[174] and that "[e]xternal life is to be regulated according to this natural light."[175] Likewise speaking of temporal matters, Luther can also write that here one "needs no light but that of reason," for this "natural light is sufficient."[176] With reference to Moses, he can even be so bold as to assert that, "[w]here he gives the commandments, we are not to follow him except so far as he agrees with the natural law."[177]

The apparent redundancy of the multiple quotations in the preceding two paragraphs is intentional, and is meant to emphasize the consistent Lutheran testimony on this point. Such emphasis is necessary because this point is frequently misunderstood or even rejected by contemporary Christians. The fear, among some, is that "promoting natural law to the role of rule and stan-

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[169] FC SD 2.26.

[170] FC SD 4.8.

[171] Ap 4.22–24.

[172] Ap 16.3.

[173] Ap 4.14.

[174] Melanchthon, *Loci Communes* (1521), in *Melanchthon and Bucer*, 50.

[175] Philip Melanchthon, *Loci Communes* (1555), in *Melanchthon on Christian Doctrine*, ed. Clyde L. Manschreck (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 128.

[176] Martin Luther, *Epiphany Sermon* (1522), in *Sermons of Martin Luther*, 6:319.

[177] Luther, *How Christians Should Regard Moses*, AE 35:173.

dard in public life means relegating Scripture [to a secondary status] and so potentially jeopardizing its sufficiency and *sola Scriptura*."[178] The language of *sola scriptura*, as well as that of Scripture's sufficiency, certainly resonates with the heirs of the Lutheran reformation; and so Lutherans, too, may intuitively share similar concerns regarding appeals to natural law rather than to the text of Scripture. As the above quotations from the Confessions and their authors reveal, however, such concerns need not be troubling where God's left-hand realm is in view. Scripture alone reveals the source of man's salvation, and for this revelation of salvation Scripture alone is sufficient. For the ordering of life in the civil realm, however, appeals to Scripture, while not at all illegitimate, are not, strictly speaking, necessary. Here, Luther can note, not only does one need "no light but that of reason"; he can in the same context observe that in some obvious respects even Scripture itself is not sufficient for guiding and directing temporal affairs: "Hence God does not in the Scriptures teach us how to build houses, to make clothing, to marry, to wage war, to sail the seas, and so on."[179]

In this light, then, the distinctive Lutheran teaching of God's two realms provides a theological justification for appeals to human reason and to the natural law which it is capable of discerning. Further, though, as a merely practical matter, such appeals not only hold out possibilities not afforded by reference to special revelation; they might also avoid some potential pitfalls attending the explicit use of Scripture in attempts to order public life in the left-hand realm. Most fundamentally, social or political positions grounded in reason, for example, proceed from a common ground shared by Christians and non-Christians alike.[180] Conversely, given the fact not only of contemporary religious pluralism, but also of increasing irreligion, appeals to Scripture are easily ignored or dismissed by those not recognizing the authority of the Bible or adhering to any specific doctrines derived from it.[181] **[See *Human Beginnings: Faith or Science?* on the following page]**

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[178] Dan Strange, "Not Ashamed! The Sufficiency of Scripture for Public Theology," *Themelios* 36 (August 2011), 251.

[179] Luther, *Epiphany Sermon*, in *Sermons of Martin Luther*, 6:319. For this same reason one should be wary of well-intended but often misguided attempts to establish "biblical principles" for all manner of temporal concerns and endeavors, especially if such principles are assumed to be the best or most useful simply because they are mentioned in Scripture.

[180] Thus, e.g., atheist libertarian Nat Hentoff can describe himself as adamantly opposed to abortion "not for religious reasons, but because I'm an atheist who can read biology." Nat Hentoff, "Election Day," *Jewish World Review* (3 November 2012), available online at http://www.jewishworldreview.com/cols/hentoff100312.php3.

[181] Thus, for example, certain positions on the contentious questions of abortion or marriage are sometimes characterized and then dismissed as exclusively "religious" positions. Summarizing the conclusions of the Pew Research Center's 2012 study, *"Nones" On the Rise*, one commentator notes that this is made especially easy because, increasingly, those unaffiliated with any religion "have an antagonistic attitude toward religious institutions. They tend to think that churches are too focused on rules…. They also think that the churches are too involved in politics…. They would like to see religion (for all practical purposes, this means

Human Beginnings: Faith or Science?

Immediately upon seating herself at the cafe table, across from new friend and fellow medical student Sally, an obviously agitated Jane blurted out, "Why do you Christians insist upon imposing your religious values on the rest of us?"

Caught off guard, Sally could only respond, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Jane explained that, while driving across town for their weekly coffee and study session, she had passed a women's medical clinic, outside of which were gathered a number of individuals. Some knelt in what was obviously prayer, while others stood with placards reading, *God is Pro-Life*, *Thou Shalt Not Kill*, and, more cryptically, *Psalm 139:19*. "Whatever you, personally, feel about it," she continued, "abortion is perfectly legal in this country, the Supreme Court has upheld this—and, I might add, the separation of church and state—on numerous occasions, and so I simply don't understand why you Christians keep insisting that it's wrong and should be prohibited just because you think your Bible says so."

"Ah," replied Sally, "I see. Well, then, let me try to explain, and perhaps clarify. First, you made reference to the separation of church and state. You of course realize, though, that this idea, or something like it, appears in the same constitutional amendment that protects the free exercise of religion. So, just as you believe women have a 'right to choose,' those individuals you saw believe—correctly—that they have a right to express their religious views."

"Yes, of course they do," Jane acknowledged; "but they don't have a right to impose them on people who don't share those views."

"No, you're right," Sally granted; "though I don't think that simply praying, or holding a sign, imposes anything at all. Nor, actually, do I think that the views held by those people—or myself—are necessarily or exclusively religious views."

"Of course they are! Why else would they be quoting the Bible?"

"Well," said Sally, "I will grant you that I myself don't think quoting the Bible is the best approach to this debate. But certainly you can see that at least one of those signs you mentioned, *Thou Shalt Not Kill*, expresses a belief that's not unique to Christians, or to the religious more generally. I mean, the courts have also pretty consistently upheld that murder is wrong, and so prohibited."

"Okay, sure; but abortion simply isn't murder, and the only reason you Christians think it is has to do with your pre-scientific Bible saying that life begins at conception."

"Well, yes, perhaps some Christians do base their views of life on what the Bible says. But, again, the view that life begins at conception certainly isn't a uniquely Christian or even religious view. In fact, you'll cover this in some detail next year in embryology." As Sally said this she was already retrieving from her bag the weighty eighth edition of the textbook assigned by her own instructor, *The Developing Human: Clinically Oriented Embryology*. "Here," she said, flipping through the first few pages, "on page fifteen, Moore and Persaud write, 'human development begins at fertilization,' and that this 'marked the beginning of each of us as a unique individual.' That's not a religious view, but a scientific one—and a nearly unanimous scientific one. In fact, the very title of another textbook I was reading, Harrison's, Golbus's, and Filly's *The Unborn Patient: Prenatal Diagnosis and Treatment*, just about says it all. And the authors open their first chapter in the same vein, when they write that 'the fetus is a patient, an individual.' Because this actually is the medical consensus, even someone like Princeton's Peter Singer, who openly advocates for abortion, admits in his own textbook on *Practical Ethics* that 'there is no doubt that from the first moments of its existence an embryo conceived from human sperm and egg is a human being.'"

Jane was quiet for a moment, before asking simply, "Really? Why have I never heard this before? Why do I get the impression from both pro-lifers and pro-choicers that abortion is a religious issue?"

"It's not my place to comment on either side's motives," replied Sally. "But really, behind all the rhetoric from both camps, the issue is quite simple. Whatever religious agreements or disagreements people might have, the issue of abortion comes down to premises that aren't explicitly religious at all, and that all reasonable and informed individuals should be able to agree on: the unjustified taking of human life is wrong, and that which comes into being with human conception is a human life."

To which Jane, before placing her coffee order, merely replied, "Hmmm…"

However lamentable this may be for those who *do* recognize that Scripture is authoritative, the logic which prompts such dismissals is readily understandable. It is the very same logic by which Christians dismiss Islamic prohibitions on the eating of pork, for instance, or the prohibition on blood transfusions among Jehovah's Witnesses.[182] As one author has concisely summarized the state of affairs outlined above:

> if the principles of the Law of Nature are accessible to our unbelieving fellow citizens because they are written on those citizens' hearts, then we have a basis for talking with them about the moral concerns relevant to the creation of [civil and criminal] law. Without this basis, we are left with the prospect of pummeling these unbelievers with biblical texts whose authority they do not accept—a strategy of communication with little prospect of success and, more importantly, little correspondence with New Testament examples of how the apostles communicated with Gentile unbelievers.[183]

The "prospect of pummeling these unbelievers with biblical texts" is not, however, the only alternative to dialogue and debate proceeding from the natural law discernible by all rational human beings. To the extent that these biblical appeals are judged ineffective, the Christian might simply be tempted to retreat into "quietism" and to withdraw altogether from the public square. This, though, is hardly a more desirable alternative. Insofar as "Christian witness" might be understood not only as witness that *is* Christian (that is, biblical and evangelical), but also as witness *by* Christians (even without reference to Scripture or gospel), it would be a tragedy simply to surrender discussions of the common good and a well ordered public life to the unregenerate. The reason for this is to be found even in the very context of Scripture's confession that the unregenerate are not without a natural knowledge of the law. Just as St. Paul declares that all men possess a natural knowledge of God, and yet suppress this knowledge, so too does he write the same regarding the natural knowledge of the law: "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" (Rom. 1:32). Similarly, in the very same context in which Luther can rather shockingly claim that Moses is not to be followed "except so far as he agrees with the natural law," he also insists that "Moses agrees exactly with nature,"[184] and, elsewhere, that "the natural laws were

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Christianity) exercise less influence over society." R.R. Reno, "The New Secular Majority," *First Things* (December 2012), 4.

[182] As each of these teachings is ostensibly supported with reference even to the Old Testament writings accepted by Christians, such examples also highlight the fact that quoting Scripture to establish moral norms is not entirely unproblematic even with respect to those who fully accept the authority of Scripture. That is to say, the matter is not only one of biblical authority, but also of interpretation and application.

[183] Timothy L. Hall, "A Law for All Seasons," *Touchstone* (June 2009), 29.

[184] Luther, *How Christians Should Regard Moses*, AE 35:168.

never so orderly and well written as by Moses."[185] Some practical implications of such conclusions follow. Freed from the curse of the law by Christ's fulfillment of it (Gal. 3:13), the Christian need not fearfully attempt to suppress his or her knowledge of the law; indeed, enlightened and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, the Christian recognizes the law to be "holy and righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12) and so can delight in it (Rom. 7:22). Further, acknowledging the divine inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture, the Christian can there find the law much more clearly and plainly revealed than it might otherwise be to reason and conscience alone. As a result, the Christian's high regard for the law, and clearer understanding of its demands, uniquely motivates as well as equips him or her to make especially beneficial contributions to the public discussion of public life and the public good—even if doing so without explicit reference to what might be dismissed as "private" religious beliefs.[186]

Within the left-hand kingdom, and for the sake of its being well ordered, there is yet another respect in which Christian witness which appeals explicitly to Scripture or to specifically Christian doctrines might have unintended but potentially detrimental effects—not only for the maintenance of the left-hand realm itself, but also for the populating of God's right-hand realm. Put simply, appeals to biblical law, for the sake of temporal concerns, risk reinforcing the popular perception of Christianity's being no different from other religions, that is, consisting essentially of certain rules, regulations, or commandments which must be followed to gain divine favor. To the extent that the unregenerate's encounters with Christianity consist of Christians proclaiming only the law, they might understandably (and not incorrectly) conclude that the law proclaimed by Christians differs little from the law proclaimed in other religions or philosophies. They might therefore conclude, again understandably (though here erroneously), that Christianity itself differs little from other religions or philosophies. Thus, they may comfort themselves with the belief that, all religions being essentially the same, and all religions being defined essentially by that civil righteousness attainable by good works, Christianity is just as true (or false) as any other religion, and so need not be given any further investigation or consideration.

An awareness of the manner in which the proclamation of law, in and for the sake of the left-hand kingdom, might also have implications which touch on the concerns of the right-hand kingdom now allows some more specific focus on the manner in which God's natural revelation of himself and his

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[185] Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, AE 40:98.

[186] For the manner in which this might be done with respect to the controversial issue of abortion, see, e.g., Peter Kreeft, *The Unaborted Socrates* (Downers Grove: InverVarsity Press, 1983), and Korey D. Maas, "Natural Science, Natural Rights, and Natural Law: Abortion in Historical Perspective," in *Natural Law: A Lutheran Reappraisal*, ed. Robert C. Baker (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 221–234. With respect to the similarly contentious issue of same-sex marriage, see, e.g., Sherif Girgis, Robert George, and Ryan T. Anderson, "What is Marriage?" *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 34 (2010), 245–287, and their expanded argument in *What is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense* (New York: Encounter, 2012).

law might serve not only the interests of the left-hand realm, but might also beneficially serve the right-hand realm's primary concern—the proclamation of the gospel.

Recalling that the vast majority of non-Christians in the United States are not in fact atheists, or even agnostics, but instead do recognize the existence of God, it is not surprising that "God-talk" is frequently heard even in public discussion of those concerns related to the left-hand realm. It has been pointed out, for example, that no American president has failed to make reference to God in his inaugural address.[187] Such invocations of God are part and parcel of what is often described as America's "civil religion." And while it was suggested above that there may be good reasons for Christians, when addressing strictly temporal concerns, to avoid appeals specifically to Scripture, uniquely Christian doctrines, or even religion in general, the fact that such appeals are often made provides certain opportunities for Christian witness.

Although civil religion, very much like the natural religion it echoes, consciously intends, for the sake of civil harmony, to blunt the many distinctive, contradictory, and thus potentially contentious doctrines of any and all individual faiths,[188] it does for this very reason tend to promote civil harmony. To the extent that a peaceful and harmonious civil society allows for the preaching of the gospel, this may be deemed a good in itself. Further, though, because it implicitly assumes a natural knowledge of God, and therefore speaks in religious terms even for the sake of temporal concerns, civil religion might be recognized as serving the interests of the church because it "creates a space in the public square for religious discourse."[189] The religious discourse of civil religion itself is, to be sure, not without major deficiencies, and even serious challenges to specifically Christian witness. Most obviously, the "anonymous God" of civil religion is decidedly not the revealed God who became incarnate, suffered, and died that he might redeem sinful human beings.[190] For this reason, Christians will want especially to be aware of the fact that even well-intentioned evangelistic references to God, if made without sufficient specificity, can be easily misunderstood. **[See *A "Regular" Prayer?* on the following page.]**

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[187] Charles P. Arand, "Strategies for God-Talk in a Pluralistic Society," in *Witness and Worship in Pluralistic America*, ed. John F. Johnson (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 2003), 14. Further, despite occasional objections, Americans will find mention of God, e.g., on their currency, in the Pledge of Allegiance, and in solemn courtroom oaths.

[188] See , e.g., David L. Adams, "The Challenges of American Civil Religion for the Church," in *Witness and Worship in Pluralistic America*, ed. John F. Johnson (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 2003), 21–22, for a brief survey of the origins and intent of the concept of civil religion.

[189] David L. Adams, "Afterword: Quo Vadis?" in *The Anonymous God: The Church Confronts Civil Religion in American Society*, ed. David L. Adams and Ken Schurb (St. Louis: Concordia, 2004), 259.

[190] Further, civil religion's insistence on reference only to a generic or "anonymous" god promotes the false impression that all religions in fact recognize and worship the same god; similarly, its inherent emphasis on civil righteousness tends to promote the false assumption that such righteousness is sufficient to establish a right relationship with God.

A "Regular" Prayer?

The pastor of a historic urban parish, Ray was an active and visible figure in its ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse neighborhood. The prominence of his congregation, as well his own respected involvement with various neighborhood initiatives, often induced community leaders to request that Ray offer a word of prayer at civic events. It was thus no surprise when a local alderman approached him to inquire about a brief prayer between the Fourth of July parade and the speeches that would follow. What did surprise, however, after Ray had again accepted the offer, was the follow-up request. "Oh," said the alderman, "and could you just make it a regular prayer this time?"

"I'm not sure I know what you mean, Henry. A regular prayer?"

"Yeah, you know, without all the fancy Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, or the cross and death stuff. Just a regular prayer, you know, to God."

"Oh, I see. But, Henry, since the true God is triune—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—I think it's important that people understand that. And that they understand that the only reason we can stand before him in prayer, confident that he'll hear us favorably, is because the Son of God died on a cross to forgive the sin which separates us from him. These things aren't peripheral, Henry; they're just part of 'regular' prayer for Christians like myself."

"Sure, Reverend, I suppose you'd know better than I would. But you know not everyone around here is a Christian. And I just hate to think that a celebration meant to unite us all might make some people feel left out. You know these are good folks; maybe not all Christians, sure, but generally religious in their way. I just think a regular prayer—that just mentions God, like in the Declaration of Independence—would go over a bit better, be a bit more friendly, you know?"

"Because, you mean, we really all believe in the same God? We just think differently about him and have different names for him?"

"Well, yes, now that you put it that way. Didn't I say you'd know better than I would about this sort of thing? That's exactly what I mean; glad you understand!"

"I do understand, Henry, but I'm afraid I don't agree. We might all use the same word, 'God,' but we don't all believe in the *same* God. As you mentioned, I believe that the only true God is triune: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But some of our friends here in the neighborhood don't believe in that God; they might believe Jesus existed, for example, but they deny that he's God. Actually, Henry, isn't that why you wanted just a 'regular' prayer, because you realize that we don't really all believe in the same God?"

"Well, now that you put it *that* way, I suppose you're right again. I guess this is a little more complicated than I thought. I'm going to have to think on it some. In the meantime, though, what do I tell the folks putting together the program?"

"Good question, Henry; you've raised some questions for me, as well. Tell you what, though, maybe it's best that we just skip the prayer this time. I'll be there, of course, just like always. But maybe it's best if I'm there just as a fellow citizen, and as pastor of St. John's, rather than something like pastor of the neighborhood, much less the city or nation."

"Fair enough, Reverend," Henry concluded. "You'd know best," he said one last time before ambling off.

Nonetheless,

> Even though the god-talk of civil religion does not take a form that we can accept, it does provide an opportunity for us to engage others and teach the truth about the gospel of Jesus Christ, much like the altar to the unknown god on the Areopagus in Athens created an opportunity for the apostle Paul to witness to Christ. Thus, while we cannot accept American civil religion as a substitute for orthodox Christian teaching, and we always must be wary of the challenges that it presents, we ought

not to dismiss it as a wholly undesirable thing with no merit whatsoever.[191]

Because this is the case, "[i]t is for us to take advantage of the opportunity civil religion presents by proclaiming the full and authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ. When we fail to do so, that failure is ours; it is not the failure of civil religion."[192]

One opportunity presented by civil religion, of which the Christian might "take advantage," derives from a central focus of civil religion itself. Concerned as it is with the maintenance of social harmony, civil religion—like the natural religion out of which it grew—is fundamentally a religion of law. As such, its primary focus is of course different from, and even antithetical to, Christianity's central focus on the gospel. Nevertheless, as even the ambiguous "God-talk" of civil religion makes evident, it presupposes, at least implicitly, and in common with Christianity, that the law is ultimately grounded in and derived from a divine being. The tacit admission of this fact by those who are accepting of the broad contours of civil religion thus opens the way for Christians to highlight and to press the potentially overlooked implications of such an admission. One point to be highlighted, for example, is that, since it is agreed that even the positive laws enacted by human legislators rest ultimately on fundamental moral principles that are divine in origin (even if known naturally, by reason, rather than by means of the special revelation of a particular religion), then immoral or unlawful behavior is an offense not only to the temporal authorities, but to and against God himself.

Thus arises the pointed question of whether one has behaved, or even can behave, in perfect accord even with those moral laws known and accepted by means of natural reason. The answer, concisely formulated by C.S. Lewis (1898–1963), is that "[t]hey know the Law of Nature; they break it. These two facts are the foundation of all clear thinking about ourselves and the universe we live in."[193] By way of analogy, and on the basis of this foundation, it might then be further pointed out that, if some such offenses are punishable even by civil authority, then it is certainly a fair assumption that those who disobey the law established by divine authority are likewise deserving of punishment by the author and executor of that law. To the extent that this (admittedly truncated and greatly simplified) train of logic is recognized as valid, and the individual's standing before God as a law-breaker—a law-breaker with "no excuse" (Rom. 2:1)—is therefore understood, he or she might be more readily receptive of the proclamation of the uniquely Christian good news that, on account of Christ's suffering the punishment of the law in man's stead, God himself has canceled "the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands" (Col. 2:14).

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[191] Adams, "The Challenges of American Civil Religion for the Church," 27.

[192] Adams, "Afterword: Quo Vadis?" 260.

[193] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 8.

Even in dialogue with those professing themselves to be atheists or agnostics, and so not accepting even of the vague "God-talk" characteristic of civil religion, one might establish some common ground from which to proclaim the gospel by initially emphasizing shared left-hand concerns pertaining to the law. This, for example, was precisely the goal of C.S. Lewis in the popular work quoted above. Beginning with the fact that all people innately recognize, embrace, and utilize the simple categories of "right" and "wrong," he was able to point out that all people possess at least the concept of moral laws. Further, despite often noted (but relatively few, and sometimes dubious) exceptions, there is something approaching universal consensus—across chronological, geographical, and cultural divides—on what these laws are and what they require, at least in their fundamental principles.[194] This then allows him to raise the question of what accounts for such a consensus and, therefore, what accounts for this law itself. His own answer is that the universal nature of such law suggests its objectivity, that is, its transcending of all particular times, places, and cultures. By way of analogy with even humanly contrived and promulgated laws, which originate most immediately from human minds, Lewis then concludes that the most satisfactory explanation of the origin of these fundamental moral principles recognized by all human beings is their being promulgated by a transcendent mind. **[See *Without Excuse?* on the facing page]**

As previously noted, Lewis himself recognizes—and cautions—that a transcendent mind is "not yet within a hundred miles of the God of Christian theology."[195] Further, one need not agree with each of Lewis' points (or, again, their greatly oversimplified presentation here) in order simply to recognize that his attempt to establish an awareness of the natural law and, on that basis, to establish some natural knowledge of a divine being to whom one is morally indebted, is one potentially practical application of these concepts in such a way that might prepare one to welcome the proclamation of the gospel. Finally, though these are only two examples out of any number possible, the above opportunities suggested by contemporary civil religious discourse and common moral understandings are perhaps especially noteworthy in this regard; that is, they proceed directly from certain common concerns regarding the law, a clear knowledge of which is prerequisite to recognizing the gospel as the "good news" it is.

However, an emphasis on the natural knowledge of God and the law is not, of course, the only manner in which one might establish and proceed from some point of contact to specifically Christian witness. Nor is proceeding from a natural knowledge of the law and its implications the only manner in which one might establish even a rudimentary knowledge of God's existence.

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[194] Perhaps unsurprisingly, given some of the conclusions noted above, these fundamental moral principles largely reflect the content of the Decalogue. On this point, see also Lewis' treatment of the subject in his *Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1947).

[195] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 25.

Without Excuse?

Though retired neighbors Thomas and Henry do not see eye to eye on questions of religion—and, in fact, regularly argue about it—both share an interest in history, and so often spend evenings together watching documentaries on a cable history channel. One night, while viewing a program on the Nuremberg trials of Nazi war criminals following the Second World War, Thomas was struck by the legal conundrum faced by the judges and prosecutors at Nuremberg. While the evidence of atrocities was overwhelming, and clearly implicated those standing trial, the defense quite rightly argued that the crimes of which the defendants were accused were not in fact "crimes" at all; that is, they had not been illegal under the judicial codes of the Third Reich. Their actions may indeed have transgressed the laws of the United States, or France, or Great Britain; but, being German citizens, it was argued, the defendants could neither be tried by the laws of another nation, nor by *ex post facto* laws. Thomas was sympathetic to the clear logic of this argument—and yet simultaneously disturbed by the implication that such inhumane acts as committed by the Nazis might be deemed legitimate simply because they were not explicitly proscribed in a written legal code. He was therefore intrigued by what the documentary described as the prosecutors' appeal to a "natural law," a law which, even if not enshrined in the written code of a particular nation, is sufficiently evident to and binding upon all rational human beings. By the light of this law, the prosecutors argued, those standing trial could have—and *should* have—clearly recognized the wrong of their actions, that their actions were, as the indictment described them, "crimes against humanity." Thus, the lack of specific prohibitions in the positive law of Germany did not excuse their behavior. As the documentary concluded, Thomas found himself also sympathetic to the logic of this argument. Again, though, he was faintly disturbed by its possible implications. If right and wrong, justice and injustice, were not simply defined by the "social contract" of a particular people in a particular place at a particular time, but were in some respect objective and universal categories, then what possibly accounted for the existence of such an objective and universal law? What—or who—could be considered its author? While the credits rolled, he began to suspect that Henry might well win their next religious argument, and that he might have to begin rethinking his doubt of God's existence.

As noted in previous sections, for example, Luther, the Lutheran dogmaticians, and the Scriptures themselves hold that some acquired knowledge of God is made possible by God's gift of reason being applied to the evidence of the natural world in which he faintly yet sufficiently reveals himself. Thus, especially when reflecting upon the first chapter of Romans, Luther frequently remarks that, even among unbelievers, "their reason tells them that the heavenly bodies cannot run their definite course without a ruler."[196] Likewise, the dogmaticians regularly confess that God might be known, even by the unregenerate, "through a process of reasoning and the accurate contemplation of created things."[197] Moreover, the dogmaticians especially move beyond simply noting this fact and regularly provide examples of the kinds of evidence, and rational inferences from it, that might be deemed sufficient to persuade the open-minded skeptic of God's existence.

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[196] Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of St. John*, AE 22:149.

[197] Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-Polemica*, quoted in Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 107. The same is confessed, it is worth noting, also by the early dogmaticians of the LCMS. So, e.g., Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:310, affirms that "a natural, rational observation of the creation reveals God as its Creator." C.F.W. Walther similarly remarks that "a person, even without Holy Scripture, can be convinced that there is a God by contemplating the world." C.F.W. Walther, *God Grant It: Daily Devotions from C.F.W. Walther*, trans. Gerhard P. Grabenhofer, ed. August Crull (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 876.

This is evident, for example, already in the works of Luther's contemporary and colleague Philip Melanchthon, who, in his commentary on the epistle to the Romans will "briefly recite nine arguments from nature which testify that God is the founder and preserver of things."[198] Commenting on "the order of things in all nature," for instance, he suggests that "we see how sure are the laws that govern the movements of the heavenly bodies," and asks: "Do they not testify clearly that nature did not come into existence by chance, but that they had their origin in some eternal mind?"[199] Similarly, appealing to the principle of causation, which "is treated at length in physics and is sufficiently established," Melanchthon can argue that "[c]auses are ordered in nature, so that it is necessary to go back to one first cause which is not set in motion from elsewhere, but moves the others. If it is the first, it is necessary that it have the power to move itself."[200] This "prime mover" or "unmoved mover," he recognizes, even the pagan philosophers had associated with God.

The Lutheran dogmatic tradition by no means universally followed Melanchthon's lead, it is true. Thus, the "second Martin," Martin Chemnitz, even while confessing that man is capable of acquiring a natural knowledge of God's existence, offers no arguments in his own dogmatics to demonstrate the existence of God. But among those orthodox Lutherans theologians who do,[201] the influential Johann Gerhard (1582–1637) offers the "most developed presentation of such apologetics to be found in Lutheran theology" at the time.[202] Significantly, Gerhard's "proofs" largely restate the "five ways" already developed by the medieval scholastic Thomas Aquinas.[203] Thus, like Melanchthon, Gerhard reiterates Aquinas' argument for the logical necessity of a "prime mover." Similarly, because all effects result from a prior cause, all effects observable in nature must eventually trace back to a first cause, which, Gerhard says, "we all call God."[204] Again echoing Aquinas, Gerhard also observes in nature a teleology, or purposefulness, seen as evidence of nature's "intelligent design," and therefore implying the existence of a supernatural designer.[205]

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[198] Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 77.

[199] Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 78.

[200] Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, 79.

[201] It is worth noting that these include even Johann Baier (1647–1695), whose *Compendium Theologiae Positivae* (1685) was edited for republication in 1879 by LCMS father C.F.W. Walther.

[202] Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, 2:37. Preus does note on the same page, however, that Gerhard's "approach is rather modest when compared with the elaborate arguments of the philosophers of the day."

[203] See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part 1, Question 2, Article 3.

[204] Johann Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, vol. 3 (Tübingen: J.G. Cotta, 1764), Locus 2, Chapter 4, Section 61.

[205] Gerhard also restates Aquinas' argument from the "principle of sufficient reason" and the distinction between contingent and necessary existence. Departing from Aquinas, though, and reminiscent of Luther's above noted comment on the mariners of Jonah, his fifth argument appeals to what he views as man's natural propensity to call upon divine aid when in danger. Gerhard, *Loci Theologici*, vol. 3, Locus 2, Chapter 4, Section 61.

The significance of Gerhard's reliance upon Aquinas is at least two-fold. First, and positively, for the many differences between the theologies of Lutheranism and medieval scholasticism, Gerhard rightly recognizes that on matters of natural evidence rationally examined one certainly need not be a Lutheran—or even a Christian[206]—to develop persuasive arguments and to reach sound conclusions. Secondly, though, with less positive practical implications, arguments first given coherent shape in the thirteenth century will, in that shape, sometimes be much less persuasive when presented in the aftermath of the "scientific revolution."[207] This is not to suggest that the laws or theories of modern science actually disprove such arguments;[208] it is only to suggest that arguments of the sort developed by Aquinas and adopted by Gerhard will in some cases benefit from expansion, revision, or nuance, especially when presented to a scientifically literate audience.

As previously noted, however, in light of the virtually unquestioned authority attributed to science by many today, scientific data might be especially persuasive in attempts to establish a natural knowledge of God. Despite frequently quoted assertions that "[o]ne of the great achievements of science has been, if not to make it impossible for an intelligent person to be religious, then at least to make it possible for them not to be religious,"[209] or that certain modern scientific theories make it "possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist,"[210] it is certainly not the case that any particular conclusions of scientific research rule out the possibility of God's existence.[211] **[See *Hardwired to Believe?* on the following page]**

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[206] Many of Aquinas' own arguments, for example, rest upon those of the pagan philosopher Aristotle.

[207] To note only one example: the understanding of motion upon which Aquinas' "first way" is predicated differs radically from that set forth in, e.g., the laws of motion enumerated by Isaac Newton (1642–1747).

[208] Indeed, as will be noted below, some data and conclusions of modern science greatly strengthen such arguments.

[209] Steven Weinberg, "A Designer Universe?" *The New York Review of Books* (21 October 1999), 48.

[210] Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, 6.

[211] This is candidly admitted by one scientific atheist, who writes that "[i]t is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world"; instead, he explains, the denial of God as an explanation results "because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism." Further, he goes on to state, "that materialism is an absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door." Richard Lewontin, "Billions and Billions of Demons," *The New York Review of Books* (9 January 1997), 31.

Hardwired to Believe?

Waiting in the DMV, George found himself engrossed in an article about research from a long outdated news magazine on the formation of religious belief in children. What especially piqued his interest was the suggestion that belief in God appeared to be natural in children. The brain's "hardwiring" seemed to predispose them to it. After finishing the article he pointed it out to Maria: "This is worth reading."

It took Maria a moment to place the article; but she then excitedly commented, "Oh, I've seen that—dentist, doctor's office, somewhere. Isn't it fascinating?"

George was surprised. "It is," he said, "but I expected you to find it more frustrating than fascinating."

"Really?" Maria asked. "What do you mean?"

"Well," George proceeded tentatively, having anticipated a few more moments to collect his thoughts; "it seems pretty much to discredit belief in God, don't you think?"

"No, I didn't get that at all. How so?"

"Because it seems to say that belief in God is a children's belief. The author is too polite to come right out and say 'childish,' but it seems comparable to belief in the tooth fairy—or any belief you grow out of."

"Ah, I see. But I don't think the author is simply being polite. I suspect she knows the difference between childhood beliefs and "childish" ones. Aren't most of the things we believe as adults things that we began to believe as children? Why single out belief in God as uniquely childish? Especially since many people actually come to acknowledge God's existence—unlike the tooth fairy's—only as adults."

"Okay, when you put it that way, perhaps 'childish' is too strong. But, still, it's uninformed belief. Doesn't the research say that the human brain has evolved in such a way that, even apart from evidence, it almost automatically produces the belief that there's a God? And without evidence, it's an unwarranted belief."

"Yes, I suppose it is belief without evidence—at that point. But that makes your tooth fairy analogy even less accurate, since children believe in a tooth fairy because of a kind of evidence: mom mentions the tooth fairy, the tooth disappears, and a quarter appears in its place."

George broke in, "Good point! So belief in God is even *less* warranted than belief in the tooth fairy!"

Mary laughed. "No, that wasn't my point. But let's run with it. Kids come to believe in the tooth fairy because of evidence. Why do they stop believing?"

"For me—because I actually woke up and caught my dad swapping the tooth for a quarter."

"So you found evidence that contradicted your belief. But until then, you still had reason to believe."

"Sure, but again, kids believe in God without evidence, so without any good reason. They only do so because their brains, for some reason, evolved to make them think that way."

"I'm not so sure. From what I recall, the evidence only says that this is how infant brains work. To say it's because of evolution is the boilerplate hypothesis for explaining everything these days. But even if that were the case—no, especially if it were the case—our brains, as you put it, 'make us believe' lots of things that we don't simply dismiss as untrue. Instead, we generally accept them unless and until we have good reason to reject them. I'd say belief in God is in this category. If we're 'programmed' to have an innate belief in God, then that belief is warranted until we have good cause to doubt it. And, since we debated evolution before, I know you've got some real questions about how adequately it actually accounts for everything."

"Yes, but…"

"So, just for the sake of argument, what if humans and their brains didn't just somehow evolve unguided, but were actually created by God? Wouldn't he want us to believe in him, and why not 'hardwire' that basic belief into us? Or, to ask the question backward, isn't the apparent 'hardwiring' perhaps some sort of evidence that there is a God who created us and wants us to acknowledge that?"

Maria's number was called out before she could press the point further; but she'd already said enough to make George regret having drawn attention to the article. He was not only stuck in the DMV, but now also forced to think once again about why he remained so resistant to the idea of God's existence.

Indeed, quite the opposite. Thus, for example, one renowned cosmologist and adult convert to Christianity explains that "[i]t was my science that drove me to the conclusion that the world is much more complicated than can be explained by science," and that "[i]t is only through the supernatural that I can understand the mystery of existence."[212] Another candidly remarks that a "commonsense interpretation of the facts suggests that a superintellect has monkeyed with physics, as well as chemistry and biology, and that there are no blind forces worth speaking about in nature."[213]

One example of the manner in which empirical data and logical reasoning might be persuasively presented in supported of God's existence is that typically referred to as the Kalam Cosmological Argument.[214] Like the cosmological arguments of Aquinas and Gerhard, this has its origins in the Middle Ages; but it has been supplemented with more recent evidence by its modern proponents. Concisely stated in syllogistic form, this argument holds that:

Premise 1: Whatever begins to exist has a cause of its existence;

Premise 2: The universe began to exist;

Conclusion: Therefore, the universe has a cause of its existence.

The first premise simply states the axiomatic principles of "sufficient reason" and "causality," that is, that all effects have causes and that something cannot be caused by nothing. The second premise simply states the modern consensus, based upon scientific data, that the universe is not eternal, but had a beginning in the finite past.[215] If both premises are correct, then it follows that the existence of the universe was caused. As whatever might be posited as having caused it to come into existence cannot be a part of the universe itself, it must be recognized as having its own existence outside the universe. That is to say, it exists outside of space and time, outside of "nature," and is therefore by definition *super*-natural.

Again, this is merely one example from an increasingly broad and deep body of literature devoted to arguments for the existence of God at least

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[212] The cosmologist is Allan Sandage, quoted in Sharon Begley, "Science Finds God," *Newsweek* (20 July 1998), 46.

[213] Fred Hoyle, "The Universe: Past and Present Reflections," *Annual Review of Astronomy and Astrophysics* 20 (1982), 16.

[214] So named for the Arabic term *kalam*, meaning "discourse" or "discussion," and reflecting the origins of the argument in medieval Islamic philosophy.

[215] This is one of the conclusions of modern science that substantially strengthens the older cosmological arguments of, e.g., Aquinas. Before the twentieth century there was little reason to believe, on the basis of natural evidence alone, that the universe came into existence, that its existence was thus contingent rather than necessary, and that it was therefore an effect requiring a cause. Advances in astronomy during the twentieth century, however, led to the discovery that the universe is not static, but is expanding. This and related discoveries thus suggested (by projecting backwards) the now generally accepted conclusion that the universe of space and time had a beginning in the finite past.

partially based in the data and methods of modern science.[216] Before leaving the realm of science, however, it is perhaps worth noting one other respect in which the modern reverence for science might potentially aid Christian witness. To the extent that the atheist, for example, remains unconvinced by arguments such as the preceding, and remains committed to the view that no supernatural entity exists, he or she might be confronted with the implications which follow from such a "naturalism" (also sometimes called "materialism" or, increasingly, "physicalism"). It might be observed, for example, that if nothing exists other than nature—matter and energy—then all that exists remains strictly subject to the laws of nature. This, in the naturalist view, must also include human beings themselves. To the extent, then, that humans, being nothing more than the sum total of their physical and biochemical composition, are therefore governed only by the natural laws of physics, chemistry, and biology, it becomes impossible to speak in any meaningful or coherent sense about human free will. It might also be pointed out that this is an implication readily admitted by scientific naturalists.[217] The potential benefit of highlighting this point is evident in the recognition that modern westerners, however committed to the authority of science, are by no means less committed to, and are even obsessed with, the belief in "choice." Therefore, just as St. Paul made the Athenians aware that they could not at the same time embrace the belief that men have their origins in gods, and that idols originating with men are gods, so too might the atheistic materialist be confronted with the contradictory nature of his or her own beliefs.

The above examples of ways in which one might proceed from certain "points of contact" with unbelieving contemporaries in attempts to establish a basic belief in God's existence are, again, not the only examples possible.[218] Moreover, proceeding on the basis of natural evidence and logical reasoning, and capitalizing on the esteem in which empirical data and the scientific method are often held, are not the only means by which skeptics might be induced to contemplate that which, at some level, they already "know." Thus, some might be especially engaged by a point of contact located in literature

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[216] For an accessible introduction to such arguments, see, e.g., Lee Strobel, *The Case for a Creator* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004).

[217] E.g., John Searle, *Minds, Brains, and Science* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 98, acknowledges that "our conception of reality simply does not allow for radical freedom."

[218] Though beyond the parameters of the present study, what is often called "evidential apologetics" deserves special mention as yet another means by which one might appeal to evidence and reason in dialogue with the skeptic. Rather than the classical "two-step" approach—first establishing that *a* God exists, and then moving on to attempt establishing that the *true* God is that of Christianity—the evidential approach appeals immediately to the historical evidence for Jesus, his claim to be God, and his vindication of this claim by resurrection from death. This "one-step" approach has, among other benefits, the benefit of keeping the conversation in close proximity to Christ and the gospel. On this, see, e.g., Gary Habermas, "Evidential Apologetics," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 91–121.

and the arts rather than in the sciences.[219] The previously mentioned professor of literature and adult convert C.S. Lewis provides one example of such an individual. He recounts the deep impression made upon him by the off-hand remark of a colleague (who, ironically, Lewis notes was "the hardest boiled of all the atheists I ever knew") commenting upon James Frazer's famous work on mythology, *The Golden Bough*: "All that stuff of Frazer's about the Dying God. Rum thing. It almost looks as if it had really happened once."[220] Similarly, in certain contexts the Christian evangelist might voice wonder about the possible reason for certain common themes evident, for example, in the myths and fairy tales of the world's many cultures. One might wonder what explains the nearly ubiquitous accounts of a divine creation, a "fall," and a longing for paradise, of a great flood, of malevolent "tricksters" and "redeemer" heroes.[221] Further, one might wonder not only what accounts for these similar themes being found across the world's literature, but also why such themes continue to resonate with readers, hearers, and viewers.[222] The question might be raised, contemplated, and discussed whether such resonance testifies to certain innate human longings and desires, which themselves might reflect some innate but obscured or suppressed knowledge of God and his law. This, for example, is what Lewis himself suggests when writing, "[i]f I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world,"[223] and, more fully:

> A man's physical hunger does not prove that a man will get any bread; he may die of starvation on a raft in the Atlantic. But surely a man's hunger does prove that he comes from a race which repairs its body by eating and inhabits a world where eatable substances exist. In the same way, though I do not believe (I wish I did) that my desire for Paradise proves that I shall enjoy it, I

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[219] In this context some have thus distinguished between arguments for the "tough-minded" and the "tender-minded" skeptic. See, e.g., Craig Parton, *The Defense Never Rests: A Lawyer's Quest for the Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2003), 97–103.

[220] C.S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Javonovich, 1955), 223–24. Though Lewis clarifies a few pages later that the conversion partially prompted by this conversation "was only to Theism, pure and simple, not to Christianity" (230), he later comments upon his eventual coming to the Christian faith that, "[t]he real clue had been put into my hand by that hard-boiled Atheist when he said, 'Rum thing, all that about the Dying God. Seems to have really happened once'" (235).

[221] On such recurring themes, see, e.g., J.F. Bierlein, *Parallel Myths* (New York: Ballantine, 1994), and Lorena Stookey, *Thematic Guide to World Mythology* (Westport: Greenwood, 2004).

[222] Lewis himself offers an answer—impossible to prove, but none the less suggestive—when he proposes that, "Myth in general is not merely misunderstood history (as Euhemerus thought) nor diabolical illusion (as some of the Fathers thought) nor priestly lying (as the philosophers of the Enlightenment thought) but, at its best, a real though unfocused gleam of divine truth falling on human imagination." C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (London: Fontana, 1960), 138 n.

[223] Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 136–37.

> think it a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some men will.[224]

More famously, and much more concisely, this is the theme sounded in the prayer with which begins the *Confessions* of St. Augustine (354–430): "you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you."[225]

[224] C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory," in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 32–33.

[225] Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

V. Conclusion

Augustine is not incorrect. Natural man—man outside of redemption in Christ—is indeed, and must be, restless. This is the case precisely because, created by God for the purpose of living in communion with him, men have been endowed with some natural knowledge of God's existence so that they might by their very nature be prompted to "seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him" (Acts 17:27). Man will therefore remain restless so long as he remains separated from God. Further, as this natural knowledge of God encompasses also, and especially, a natural knowledge of the law, sinful man cannot but be restless and uneasy in his awareness that even this minimal knowledge leaves him with "no excuse" before God (Rom. 2:1). Finally, unable and unwilling to face the stark implications of even this natural knowledge, sinful man actively seeks to suppress it; his inability to do so completely, however, only further contributes to his restless unease.[226]

Even in the relatively religious United States, indicators suggest that both the number and the percentage of the "restless" continue to grow annually. Recent data reveals, for example, that in addition to those who adhere to many and various non-Christian religions, nearly 20% of Americans describe themselves as unaffiliated with any religion. This includes more than thirteen million individuals who describe themselves specifically as atheists or agnostics.[227] Despite such statistics, however, the testimony of Scripture, confessed also by the Lutheran confessors and dogmaticians, is that even those who declare themselves atheists or agnostics in fact retain some knowledge of God written on their hearts. To be sure, this is "not saving knowledge"; indeed, its very possession may lead many to be "confused about the one true God" and "to believe falsely that all religions lead to salvation." Nonetheless, as the above pages have attempted to demonstrate, it also remains true that some "understanding of the natural knowledge of God can assist the members of the congregations of the LCMS in their witness."[228]

It is thus the Christian's great privilege (and, indeed, the Lord's great mandate [Matt. 28:19]) to proclaim unto the world the good news that the God in whom eternal rest is to be found need no longer be sought for—or hidden from—but that this God has himself sought out, found, and redeemed his fallen creatures. It is the Christian's great privilege to announce that the law, which even the unregenerate know pronounces death for those who break it (Rom. 1:32), has been fulfilled by this God himself, who in human flesh not only satisfied its requirements in the stead of sinful man, but also in the

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[226] On this point, see, e.g., R.C. Sproul, *If There's a God, Why Are There Atheists?* (Orlando: Ligonier, 1997), 72–78.

[227] Pew Research Center, *"Nones" On the Rise*, 9. To put this in some perspective, the number of atheists and agnostics in the U.S. is roughly six times the number of LCMS Lutherans, and approximately twice as many as the total number of American Lutherans.

[228] Resolution 3-04A, *2007 Convention Proceedings*, 121.

sinner's stead suffered the mortal penalty of its having been broken. It is the Christian's great privilege, therefore, to give name to the "unknown god" of Athens, the "anonymous god" of civil religion, and the denied god of modern skepticism and atheism—to proclaim "the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the Glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:9–11).

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