

The Natural Knowledge of God in Our Christian Witness

Bible Study and Discussion Guide

This Bible study is based on the 2013 report by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *The Natural Knowledge of God in Christian Confession and Witness*.¹ This Bible study may be used independently or in connection with the CTCR report. The following terms are used in this study:

Natural Revelation: God’s revelation of Himself in nature, in the things He has created (Rom. 1:19; Ps. 19:1).

Special Revelation: God’s revelation of Himself through His Son and in His written Word (Heb. 1:1-2).

Natural Knowledge: The dim and incomplete knowledge of God that human beings have through His revelation of Himself in nature (Rom. 1:20).

Natural Law: God’s universal moral laws written on the hearts of all people, believers and unbelievers alike (Rom. 2:15).

The Natural Knowledge of God

Read Ps. 19:1-6 and Ps. 104. According to these psalms, how does creation reveal its Creator? What is revealed about Him? Where and when have you seen evidence of this proclamation by the natural world?

The most important text in Scripture about the natural knowledge of God is Romans 1:19-20: “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.”

God has shown even unbelievers “what can be known” about Him. This revelation of His power and glory in creation is not a complete or saving knowledge of God, but it is “clearly perceived” (Rom. 1:19-20) and it is “the truth about God” (Rom. 1:25).

What do the following accounts from world religions reveal about humanity’s natural knowledge of God?

¹ The CTCR report, *The Natural Knowledge of God in Christian Confession and Christian Witness* (LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 2013) is available for download at <http://www.lcms.org/Document.fdoc?src=lcm&id=2431> or available for purchase through Concordia Publishing House at www.cph.org.

“He existed, Ta’arua was his name. In the immensity [of space] there was no earth, there was no sky. There was no sea, there was no man. Above, Ta’arua calls. Existing alone, he became the universe.”²

“At the beginning all things were in the mind of Wakonda. All creatures including man were spirits. They moved about in space between the earth and the stars. They were seeking a place where they could come into bodily existence.”³

“The great [Hindu] sage Manu declared, ‘One ought to know the Supreme Spirit Who is the Ruler of all, subtler than the subtlest, of resplendent glory, and capable of being realized only by the meditation of pure-minded ones’”⁴

Read Rom. 1:21-25. *Although God revealed Himself “in the things that have been made,” what did fallen human beings do with that revealed knowledge?*

Even people who have never heard the story of God’s revelation of Himself in Christ and in Scripture are “without excuse” because they “knew God,” that is, they knew there was a God who created all things and yet they “exchanged the truth about God for a lie” (Rom. 1:20-21, 25). This exchange of a true natural knowledge of God for the lie of idolatry is also highlighted in Paul’s proclamations in Acts 14 and 17, the two passages that, after Romans 1, are most often used in discussing humanity’s natural knowledge of God.

Read Acts 14:8-18. *What do the people of Lystra believe about Paul and Barnabas after witnessing the miraculous healing of the lame man? How does their response reflect mankind’s natural knowledge of God? What evidence from nature do the apostles use as they try to convince the people of the existence of the one true God?*

The proclamation of Paul and Barnabas in Lystra in Acts 14:15–17 is one the earliest New Testament records of a public Christian witness to a non-Jewish audience.

Read Acts 17:22-31. *What did Paul observe about the people of Athens? How does he use natural revelation to tell them about the true God? What does the apostle say about their idols?*

God has so designed His creation says Paul, “that [all people] should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him” (Acts 17:27). The apostle indicates that people are “groping” or “fumbling” their way toward God.

Read Ps. 53:1-5. *God looks down from heaven to see “if there are any who understand.” What conclusions does the psalmist reach about humanity’s natural knowledge of God?*

² Tahitian creation story in Philip Novak, *The World’s Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World’s Religions* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 140-141.

³ North American Omaha creation story in Novak, 334.

⁴ Swami Bhaskarananda, *The Essentials of Hinduism* (Seattle: Viveka Press, 2002), 66.

Read Rom. 3:10-11; 1 Cor. 1:21 and Gal. 4:8-9. What does the apostle Paul say in these verses about humanity's natural knowledge of God?

The verses in the previous section show us that human beings can acknowledge the *existence* of God, but the above verses indicate that unbelievers do not have any natural knowledge of the *saving work* of God in Christ. According to Galatians 4:8, those who do not know God are enslaved “to those that by nature are not gods.” In Galatians 4:9, Paul speaks of believers who have come “to know God.” Here, for us, “to know” does not mean “to perceive” or “to acquire knowledge about,” but is used in the biblical sense of “to have a relationship with,” specifically to trust in the grace of God. The ignorance of God discussed in these verses is not absolute ignorance but it is an ignorance of the Gospel.

The Lutheran Confessions and Natural Knowledge

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession says that original righteousness (the righteousness that Adam and Eve had before the fall into sin) included “a *more certain* knowledge of God,” implying that human beings, even after the fall into sin, do not lack *all* knowledge of God, but have a *less certain* knowledge.⁵ In his Large Catechism, Martin Luther writes that “there has never been a nation so wicked that it did not establish and maintain some sort of worship.”⁶ Luther hastens to add, of course, that those outside the Christian church do not know God rightly and so do not have saving faith.

Sinful human beings have some knowledge of God, but it is not the knowledge revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ and granted by the Holy Spirit. The Formula of Concord states that “pagans had *something* of a knowledge of God,” but remarks that “they did not *truly* know him.”⁷ The Formula also states: “Even though human reason or natural intellect may still have a dim spark of knowledge that a god exists . . . nevertheless [that knowledge] is 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; they cannot regard it as truth.”⁸

Read 1 Cor. 2:6-16. Why are even “the most skillful and learned people” unable to understand or believe the Gospel? Who alone grants such understanding?

Read Is. 44:12-20. How do these verses illustrate the “ignorant, blind, and perverted” knowledge of God that human beings have through natural revelation?

⁵ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 2, *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 114.17, italics added.

⁶ Large Catechism, *The Book of Concord*, 388.17.

⁷ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article 5, *The Book of Concord*, 585.22, italics added.

⁸ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article 2, *The Book of Concord*, 545.9.

Read Matt. 11:25-27 and Matt. 16:13-17. Who truly knows the Father? How did Simon Peter come to know that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of the living God”?

Additional Comments from Martin Luther on Natural Knowledge

Martin Luther wrote that “the forms of worship and the religion that have been and remained among all nations are abundant evidence that at some time all men have had a general knowledge of God.”⁹ Writing about the sailors whose ship carried Jonah away from Nineveh (referring especially to Jonah 1:5: “Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god”), Luther comments:

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 . . . 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 reason 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.¹⁰

Luther goes on to comment on two defects in the “bright light” of human reason. People may know that God *can* help them, but they do not know if he *wants* to help them, and even though they believe that there is a God, they cannot know or find the *true* God.

Read Jonah 1:1-6. What prompts the sailors to cry out to their gods? What do those cries reveal about the sailors’ attitude toward their gods? How do the sailors illustrate the two defects mentioned by Luther? **Read Jonah 1:7-16.** What do the sailors learn about Jonah’s God? How do they come to this knowledge, by natural revelation or through special revelation? How do the sailors respond after learning about the God of the Hebrews?

Natural Law: The Law Written on the Heart

The apostle Paul discusses humanity’s awareness of natural law. 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

⁹ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), *Luther’s Works*, ed. J. Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen, vol. 26 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 399.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Jonah* (1526), *Luther’s Works*, ed. Hilton C Oswald, vol. 19 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1974), 53-54.

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” (Rom. 2:14-15).

Read Rom. 1:28–32 and Eph. 4:17-19. *According to these verses, what do people, by nature, know about God or His laws? Unitarians teach that “human nature is imperfect, but not inherently bad . . . no man stands condemned.”¹¹ How does such a belief contradict what is taught in these verses?*

There is other biblical evidence concerning natural law. In the Old Testament, nations are condemned because they violated God’s natural law. Even though the God of Israel had not revealed His commands to those nations, His law was written on the hearts of the rulers and their subjects.

Read Amos 1:3-15 and Hab. 2:6-20. *What had the unbelieving nations done to violate natural law?*

Martin Luther said that the knowledge of natural law is a fact of human nature, written on the hearts of all. He commented that the Ten Commandments summarize the content of natural law.

How do the following statements from other religions support the idea that natural law is summarized in the Ten Commandments?

“I have not slain men ... I have not stolen” (ancient Egyptian confession from The Book of the Dead).¹²

“I have not been grasping” (ancient Egyptian confession)¹³

“Utter not a word by which anyone could be wounded” (Hindu saying).¹⁴

“Has he despised Father and Mother?” (Babylonian list of sins)¹⁵

The Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) argued against natural law, saying that morality is only “a sum of societal 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” (32).

How do we see Hume’s claim reflected in modern attitudes toward right and wrong?

¹¹ F. E. Mayer, *The Religious Bodies of America* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), 507.

¹² C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperOne, 1974), 93.

¹³ Lewis, 85.

¹⁴ Lewis, 85.

¹⁵ Lewis, 90.

The Limitations of Natural Knowledge

The natural knowledge of God does not and cannot include the knowledge of the Gospel. That saving knowledge is revealed only in Christ and His Word.

Read Rom. 8:5-11. What is the natural human response toward God, His Law and the things of the Spirit of God? ***Read 1 Cor. 12:3.*** Who enables us to confess the lordship of Jesus Christ?

Fallen human beings have some knowledge of God, but sin corrupts that knowledge.

Read Gen. 8:21, Matt. 15:19, Rom. 3:10-18 and Rom. 8:7. What do these verses say about the corrupting effects of sin?

Fallen human beings develop false ideas about God and so create false religions to serve false gods. Natural knowledge cannot show them the God who justifies and saves from sin. The Formula of Concord states: “We believe, teach, and confess that the unregenerated human will is not only turned away from God but has also become God’s enemy, that it has only the desire and will to do evil and whatever is opposed to God.”¹⁶

Consider various world religions as well as contemporary worldviews and philosophies. What distorted pictures of god have been invented by unregenerated human reason and human will, that is, by human reason and human will that have not been born again in Baptism and enlightened by the Holy Spirit? ***Read Jer. 10:5, Jer. 14:22, Hab. 2:18-20, and Zech. 10:1-2.*** Sin-tainted human reason invents false gods. How are those gods described and compared to the true God in these verses?

Common Ground for Christian Witness

An understanding of the natural knowledge of God and of the law written on the heart may be helpful as we witness to unbelievers. Appeals to natural revelation and natural law may help us establish common ground or a point of contact with non-Christians.

Although Jesus and His apostles were not witnessing to atheists or agnostics, they established common ground with those who listened. They met their fellow Jews “where they were,” appealing to the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures and the belief in a promised Messiah. The apostles often began their witness by referring to beliefs they held in common with their audiences. The apostolic proclamation progressed from that which the audience *did* know to that which it *should* know.

Read John 4:1-26. What common ground does Jesus establish with the Samaritan woman? ***Read Luke 4:16-21 and Luke 10:25-28.*** How does Jesus make use of common ground with the Jews in His teaching?

¹⁶ Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article 2, *The Book of Concord*, 492.2.

Read Acts 22:1-5. What common ground does Paul establish with the angry crowd in Jerusalem? **Read Acts 26:24-29.** What common ground does Paul use in his witness to King Agrippa?

In speaking with the people of Athens, Paul establishes a point of contact with them, noting that they are “very religious” (Acts 17:22). The apostle’s proclamation of “the unknown god” (Acts 17:22–31), however, was not the beginning of his preaching in Athens. Paul’s preaching began in the synagogue and in the marketplace as he proclaimed Christ and His bodily resurrection (Acts 17:16-21).

Read Acts 17:16-21. What is the Athenians’ response after listening to Paul’s first proclamation about Jesus and the resurrection?

Some of the Athenians requested that Paul speak to them again, prompting his later speech. As Paul does in Athens, we can begin our witness by proclaiming the Gospel, although the good news may sound strange to those who are listening. As they become curious, or as objections arise, we might then use their curiosity and objections as points of contact with them.

Paul found a point of contact with his listeners in the many idols and altars of Athens, a sight that provoked the apostle (Acts 17:16). Yet in addressing his idolatrous audience, he does not tell his listeners that the Bible forbids graven images (Ex. 20:4) or that the Bible teaches that God is one (Deut. 6:4). Instead of quoting biblical teachings that his audience does not know or accept as having authority, Paul begins with what his hearers already know.

Read Acts 17:22-23 and 28. What common ground with his hearers does Paul highlight?

Paul’s hearers accept the fundamental importance of religion. Quoting their own poets to them, Paul transitions from what his non-Christian hearers *do* know to what they *should* know. “Being then God’s offspring,” he 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” (Acts 17:29). Paul calls such thoughts “ignorance” (Acts 17:30). He then calls on them to repent of their false worship and draws their attention to the “man whom he [God] has appointed,” and through whom “he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31).

Read Acts 17:32-34. How does Paul’s audience respond to his proclamation of judgment and of Jesus’ resurrection?

All people know that God exists, even if they suppress that knowledge (Rom. 1:18). Many opportunities for Christian witness may occur in conversation with those who, like the Athenians of Paul’s day, readily profess belief in *a* god—a starting point for telling them about the *true* God.

Man’s inborn knowledge of the law, even when suppressed or distorted, also provides common ground shared by Christians and non-Christians alike (Rom. 2:14-15). Such an inborn knowledge is increasingly recognized even by non-Christians, as noted in this comment on a study of moral

behavior in infants: “Babies possess certain moral foundations—the capacity and willingness to judge the actions of others, some sense of justice, gut responses to altruism and nastiness. Regardless of how smart we are, if we didn’t start with this basic apparatus, we would be nothing more than amoral agents, ruthlessly driven to pursue our self-interest.”¹⁷

Read the classroom situation described below. How do these students reveal their inborn knowledge of God’s law?

“When my students tell me that ethics are merely expressions of cultural norms and not beholden to universal truths, I catch them off guard. I ask, ‘If I grade you down just because I do not like you, has anything wrong happened?’ These students who were all relativists very quickly become ethical absolutists: ‘Of course it is wrong to grade someone down just because you do not like them.’ When I push with ‘Why?’ they explain, ‘It isn’t fair!’”¹⁸

Even in talking with atheists or agnostics, we might establish common ground from which to proclaim the Gospel by emphasizing concerns about the law. All people recognize the simple categories of “right” and “wrong” (unless they suppress such knowledge), an understanding that shows they possess the concept of moral laws. There is often a significant consensus—across chronological, geographical and cultural divides—on what these laws are and what they require. Common concerns about the law are helpful because a clear knowledge of that law is required before someone can recognize the Gospel as “good news.”

Christian Witness in the Public Square

Man’s natural knowledge of the law helps to maintain the outward discipline and order that preserve society. God works through human rulers and their laws to preserve earthly good and restrain evil.¹⁹ Because the church’s proclamation of the Gospel takes place within society, the preservation of a just and orderly society serves the Gospel.

Read Acts 25:1-12. How does Paul, as a Roman citizen, appeal to Roman law so that he might continue his proclamation of the Gospel?

We can appeal to human reason and natural law when talking to people who may ignore or dismiss the authority of the Bible. Since many non-Christians in the United States recognize the existence of God, it is not surprising that “God talk” is often heard even in public discussions. For example, American presidents may close a speech with the words, “God bless America.” Such references to God are part of what is often described as America’s “civil religion.” Appeals to Scripture, to Christian doctrines or to religion in general provide opportunities for Christian witness.

¹⁷ Paul Bloom, “The Moral Life of Babies,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 2010 at http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/09/magazine/09babies-t.html?_r=0.

¹⁸ Mark Mattes, “A Lutheran Case for Apologetics,” *Logia* 24:3 (Holy Trinity 2015): 28.

¹⁹ God’s rule through human laws and institutions is sometimes called His left hand kingdom, or the kingdom of power. His right hand kingdom, or the kingdom of grace, is the Church, in which He rules His redeemed people with His Word. As Christians, we are citizens of both kingdoms (1 Peter 2:13-14; Phil. 3:20).

When have you heard “God talk” in public discussions concerning political issues (for example, references to displays of the Ten Commandments or phrases such as “God bless America” or “In God We Trust”)? How might you use such “God talk” as an opportunity for Christian witness?

A peaceful civil society allows for the preaching of the Gospel. Civil religion creates room in the public square for religious discussions. The “anonymous God” of civil religion,²⁰ however, is not the revealed God who took on human flesh, suffered, died, and rose from the dead to redeem sinful human beings. We must realize that even our well-intentioned references to God can be easily misunderstood.

Since God reveals Himself in nature, scientific information can be useful as we witness to people. Research in biology, astronomy or physics may raise questions about the design of the universe and the existence of a divine designer, but even establishing such common ground is merely a means to an end. The goal of our Christian witness is the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Other points of contact with non-believers might include literature and the arts. Folk tales and myths of many world cultures tell of a divine creation, a “fall” and a longing for paradise, a great flood, evil “tricksters” and “redeemer” heroes.

What books, movies or television shows feature a longing for paradise, an evil trickster, a redeemer hero or similar themes? How do such themes reflect natural law? How might these themes serve as a point of contact for witnessing about Jesus Christ?

Such themes continue to resonate with people. This human longing for redemption and paradise reflects the inborn but obscured knowledge of God and His law. St. Augustine (A. D. 354–430), addressing God in his book, *Confessions*, writes: “You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”²¹

Conclusion

Created by God to live in communion with Him, people remain restless so long as they are separated from Him, “having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12). Even in the relatively religious United States, the number of the “restless” grows annually. More than 20% of Americans describe themselves as unaffiliated with any religion.²² This includes more than thirteen million individuals who describe themselves specifically as atheists or agnostics. Yet even those who claim to be atheists or agnostics retain the law of God written on their hearts. They know their Creator exists, even if they suppress that knowledge.

²⁰ The God of civil religion is “anonymous” because the God to whom people refer in phrases such as “God bless America” is not necessarily the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The anonymous God is the “unknown god” of the people of Athens (Acts 17:23).

²¹ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). 3

²² As of November 2015, “the religiously unaffiliated (also called the “nones”) now account for 23% of the adult population.” “U. S. Public Becoming Less Religious,” November 3, 2015, at <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious>.

It is our great privilege and the Lord's command (Matt. 28:19-20) to tell the world the good news that God Himself has sought, found and redeemed fallen human beings. He sent His Son to suffer the penalty of death for sinners and to rise from the dead, offering salvation to all. We proclaim the name of Jesus, "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).