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## REASON DIABOLICAL, REASON DIVINE: MELANCHTHON ON PHILOSOPHY, HUMANISM AND SCRIPTURE

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### INTRODUCTION

I begin with a quotation. I have used it in print before, but it provides such a high value of entertainment that I cannot forego reusing it here. The quotation is from a 19th c. American polemicist whose bed seems to have had no right side from which to get up. I speak, of course, of Orestes Brownson. Brownson says:

Here is the grand fact that Protestant theologians always overlook. They, in reality, always present nature and grace as two antagonistic powers, and suppose the presence of the one must be the physical destruction of the other. Luther and Calvin, weary of the good works, and shrinking from the efforts to acquire the personal virtues enjoined by Catholicity, began their so-called reform by asserting the total depravity of human nature, and maintaining, that original sin involved the loss of reason and free-will, reducing man physically to the condition of irrational animals, and superadding the penalty of guilt. Here, in the very outset, they denied natural reason, all natural religion, and all natural morality, and consequently asserted for man in the natural order, left to his natural powers and faculties, universal skepticism and moral indifference; for without reason there can be no belief, and without free-will no moral obligation, no moral difference of actions.<sup>1</sup>

Now, Brownson manages to be wrong in so many different ways here that it would be hard to catalogue them all. And yet his view is nevertheless a prevalent one. (G.K. Chesterton, on the other hand, accused the disciples of John Calvin of being rationalists—in other words, the opposite of what Brownson suggests; one can only shrug.<sup>2</sup>) There are a number of reasons, I would suggest, for which general and apparently learned opinion came to this conclusion—these have to do with everything from culpably irresponsible polemics to Protestants' own widespread amnesia about their own heritage. But the conclusion, for all its popularity, is, if I may use a technical term, "false." Or, in the parlance of our times, it is an "alternative fact."

Yet this criticism, or something like it, is found also in sources that purport to be scholarly—particularly in treatments of natural law—and it was voiced already by prominent individuals in the sixteenth century as well, including the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus, who often accused the Lutherans of destroying *bonae literae*,<sup>3</sup> the humane arts or liberal learning. For instance, in a letter to Martin Luther from April 1526, he writes:

But what does terribly pain me, and all good men, is that your arrogant, insolent, rebellious nature has cast the world into deadly strife, that you have opposed good men and lov-

1. Orestes Brownson, "Protestantism in a Nutshell," in *Essays and Reviews Chiefly on Theology, Politics and Socialism* (New York: D. & J. Sadlier, 1852), 251 (emphasis mine).

2. Cf. G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Company, 1909), 27-8. The passage shows Chesterton at his most absurd.

3. The customary spelling in the citations below.

ers of letters with a set of malignant Pharisees, and that you have armed the wicked and turbulent to rebel....<sup>4</sup>

In a 1528 letter to Melanchthon, he writes:

Would that Luther had avoided opportunities for sedition and had called for good morals with a manner equally vehement as what he had for the defense of his dogmas! Because I see no remedy for these tumults, I come to the aid of *bonis literis* as much as is permitted; nevertheless I seem to foresee their destruction.<sup>5</sup>

When he was writing to a non-Lutheran, he could be even more direct. So, in a 1528 letter to Nicholas Varius, he could say:

I hate those Evangelicals for many reasons, but especially for the following one: because by their agency *bonae literae* are feeble, they grow cold, they lie on the ground, they perish; and what is human life without them? They love money and a wife; they consider everything else not worth a hair.<sup>6</sup>

It is true that Luther's manner of speaking could lend itself to glosses like those of Erasmus. For example, Luther once referred to reason as "the devil's bride" and "the lovely whore" and addressed it as "you mangy, leprous whore, you holy reason." Again, it is "the foremost whore the devil has." "You cursed whore," he thunders, "shut up!" Yet again, "reason is the devil's prostitute and can do nothing else but slander and dishonor what God does and says."<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, as Pekka Kärkkäinen has noted, "In the *Disputation on the Human Being* (1536), Luther praises reason as the most excellent gift of God, even as something divine in

humans."<sup>8</sup> Luther goes on to call it "the discoverer and governor of all the arts, medicine, and the laws, and whatever wisdom, power, virtue, and glory is possessed by men in this life....Nor did God take away this majesty from reason after the Fall, but rather confirmed it."<sup>9</sup> Luther also was capable of saying the following in a letter to the Wittenberg poet Eobanus Hessus in 1523:

I am persuaded that without the knowledge of literature pure theology cannot at all endure, just as heretofore, when letters have declined and lain prostrate, theology, too, has wretchedly fallen and lain prostrate; nay, I see that there has never been a great revelation of the Word of God unless He has first prepared the way by the rise and prosperity of languages and letters, as though they were John the Baptists. There is, indeed, nothing that I have less wish to see done against our young people than that they should omit to study poetry and rhetoric. Certainly it is my desire that there shall be as many poets and rhetoricians as possible, because I see by these studies, as by no other means, people are wonderfully fitted for the grasping of sacred truth and for handling it skillfully and happily....As Christ lives, I am often angry with myself that my age and my manner of life do not leave me any time to busy myself with the poets and orators. I had bought me a Homer that I might become a Greek.<sup>10</sup>

What is going on here?

To answer that question, let us, as an exercise in constructive intellectual history, focus on some particular aspects of the problem that one often encounters in critical accounts of the Protestant Reformers,

overtly polemical or otherwise: How can Protestants philosophize? How can they support the liberal arts? How can they promote a natural law doctrine? These are all endeavors in which Protestants were in fact engaged in the sixteenth century: they philosophized; they vigorously supported the liberal arts, particularly through the development of new and more humanistic educational institutions



PORTRAIT OF PHILIP MELANCHTHON, 1537, BY LUCAS CRANACH THE ELDER

4. Letter 729 in Preserved Smith and Charles M. Jacobs, editors and translators, *Luther's Correspondence and Other Contemporary Letters*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Lutheran Publication Society, 1918), 369.

5. Letter 1944 in P.S. Allen and H.M. Allen, editors, *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterdami*, vol. 7 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), 321. The translation is my own.

6. Letter 1973 in *ibid.*, 360. The translation is my own. On this issue, cf. Erika Rummel, *The Confessionalization of Humanism in Reformation Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 31-4.

7. All except the last are from Luther's last sermon in Wittenberg (17 January 1546), which was written down by Georg Rörer: see John Doberstein, editor and translator, *Luther's Works*, vol. 51 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 374, 376. The last is from Part II of *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, translated by Conrad Bergendorf, in Conrad Bergendorf, editor, *Luther's Works*, vol. 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 174-5. For Luther and the classics, cf. Carl P.E. Springer, *Luther's Aesop* (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2011), 1-34.

8. Pekka Kärkkäinen, "Philosophy among and in the Wake of the Reformers: Luther, Melanchthon, Zwingli, and Calvin," in Henrik Lagerlund and Benjamin Hill, editors, *The Routledge Companion to Sixteenth Century Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 195.

9. Martin Luther, *Die Disputation de homine*, in *WA* 39, 175 (theses 5 and 9). The translation is my own.

10. Letter 580 in Smith and Jacobs, *Luther's Correspondence*, 176.

and curricular reform; they rigorously defended the validity of the law of nature.

But at the outset we seem to meet with contradictions even on Protestants' own principles. Let us use as a synecdoche what are usually referred to as the formal and material principles of the Reformation, *sola scriptura* and *sola fide*. Doesn't *sola scriptura*—the principle that Scripture is the Christian's ultimate authority in matters of faith and life—outlaw philosophy and the arts by obliterating all non-biblical authority, including the authority of reason or of an intellectual tradition? And doesn't *sola fide*—the principle that man is accepted of God only because of the imputed righteousness of Christ, received by faith—render moral action superfluous? In the quotations above, Luther seems—*seems*—to say both “yes” and “no.” But is he? Is he (and others like him) caught on the horns of a self-contradictory and thus irreconcilable dilemma?

What I shall argue is that, paradoxical as it may seem at the outset, it is precisely *sola Scriptura* and justification *sola fide*, both understood via the Lutheran and Melanchthonian dialectic of Law and Gospel, that provide the warrant for moral philosophy and the liberal arts in magisterial Protestant understanding, while at the same time rendering Luther's and Melanchthon's criticisms of “reason” and philosophy intelligible. Some works of Luther's colleague Philip Melanchthon, who is well known but not as well known as he should be, can clarify how the pieces of this puzzle fit together.<sup>11</sup>

## MELANCHTHON, REASON, AND PHILOSOPHY

Like Luther, Melanchthon did not always speak highly of philosophy, or at least of particular kinds of philosophy. Thus at the outset it should be acknowledged that it is true that early in his career in Wittenberg, where he arrived in 1518, Melanchthon, together with Luther, voiced strong opposition to contemporary Aristotelianism, which, in its various permutations, was still the main philosophical force in the academy. But it is important to note what this meant, and what this did not mean. Nicole Kuroпка has noted two grounds on which philosophy, and Aristotle in particular, were criticized: theological and philological.<sup>12</sup> For the

11. It should be observed, however, that the works of many others—such as Girolamo Zanchi, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and John Calvin—could do so as well.

12. Nicole Kuroпка, “Philip Melanchthon and Aristotle,” translated by Timothy J.

first, to be associated more with Luther (though not exclusively), it was claimed that Aristotle corrupted the faith by perverting Scripture's teaching of righteousness and justification with a false doctrine of works righteousness. (It is not my purpose here to adjudicate this controversy; my concern at present is historical archaeology.) For the second, to be associated more with Melanchthon, the accurate understanding of Aristotle was impaired by the use of corrupt Latin translations, and so the primary *desideratum* was for an accurate Greek text of the Stagirite. This was a task Melanchthon himself wished to undertake. We ought not to pass too quickly over the significance of this fact: already upon his arrival in Wittenberg, and indeed even before, during his time in Tübingen, Melanchthon did not wish to discard the study of Aristotle, but to rejuvenate it.

## PARADOXICAL AS IT MAY SEEM AT THE OUTSET, IT IS PRECISELY SOLA SCRIPTURA AND JUSTIFICATION SOLA FIDE, BOTH UNDERSTOOD VIA THE LUTHERAN AND MELANCHTHONIAN DIALECTIC OF LAW AND GOSPEL, THAT PROVIDE THE WARRANT FOR MORAL PHILOSOPHY AND THE LIBERAL ARTS IN MAGISTERIAL PROTESTANT UNDERSTANDING.

It is nevertheless true that Aristotle became something of a *bête noire* for Melanchthon between 1519 (shortly after coming to Wittenberg) and 1525, as Kuroпка has also pointed out, and Aristotle disappeared for a time from the curriculum at Wittenberg, even while Melanchthon continued to vigorously encourage the study of the liberal arts (thus we should mark in this period a distinction and separability between the two, which did not obtain later).<sup>13</sup> Why? He had been convinced of the theological criticism of Aristotle, and particularly of the use of Aristotle in understanding the doctrine of salvation. He sums up his objections in a letter to Nicholas von Amsdorf in 1520:

Already a long time ago the divine Paul foresaw that what concerns Christianity would be shaken by philosophical traditions. For that reason he sharply rails against other human teachings and, writing to the Colossians, with mouth wide open he openly instructs that wariness is necessary “lest anyone take us captive by philosophy.” And would that the oracle of the Apostle had availed, since the votes of the ancients were scorned, by which philosophy, with stunning agreement, was condemned.<sup>14</sup>

Wengert, *Lutheran Quarterly* 25 (2011), 16. For the remainder of this paragraph, see Kuroпка, 16-27.

13. Kuroпка, “Melanchthon and Aristotle,” 17.

14. The letter served as a preface to Aristophanes' *Clouds* (*Corpus Reformatorum* 1, 274-5). Kuroпка refers to the letter (“Melanchthon and Aristotle,” 25 n. 5), but does not quote it. The translation is my own. Melanchthon's point here seems to be that people ought to listen to Paul, since they didn't listen to the Athenian jury that condemned philosophy in the person of Socrates when they voted him guilty of corrupting the youth (among other charges) and elected to execute him. Though Aristotle is not named in this passage, he is the chief conduit by which “human teachings” corrupt the gospel, on which see below.

Two items should be observed in connection with this passage. First of all, it serves as a preface to Aristophanes' *Clouds*. Anyone who has read the play knows that its humor turns on the mockery of philosophy, including natural philosophy, and particularly of Socrates himself. Second, Melanchthon's apparent rejection of philosophy *seems* to have good scriptural support. He invokes Colossians 2.8: "See that no one takes you captive by philosophy." This is a verse to which we shall return. In the meantime, one might note that it has a long pedigree of anti-philosophical use. Augustine, for instance, so employs it in *Confessions* 3.4.8. Interestingly, however, Augustine's quotation of the passage comes in the midst of his praise for Cicero's proreptic to philosophy, the (now lost) *Hortensius*. This tips us off that already in the traditional use of Col. 2.8 there is something more complex going on than may at first meet the eye, and that is no less true in Melanchthon's case, as we shall see.

Even if that is the case, however, his voiced opposition to what he calls "philosophy" here is nevertheless forceful, and would not seem to leave a lot of wiggle-room. But things changed for Melanchthon over the course of the 1520s, though the developments that occurred did not make him any friendlier to late medieval scholasticism. And what changed had to do both with external circumstances and with Melanchthon's own understanding of the nascent Lutheran faith—two causes that were related to each other and developed in tandem.

First, with respect to external circumstances: Wittenberg in the early 1520s was roiled by civil unrest. Near the end of 1521 occurred what is referred to as the "Wittenberg Movement," in which Andreas Karlstadt and Gabriel Zwilling claimed the mantle of Luther and called for the immediate implementation of what they believed were Luther's intended reforms such as communion in both kinds and the removal of images. They also called on students to quit the university. Their preaching led to riots by excitable students—at least, the students that were left—and townsmen. Around the same time Wittenberg saw the arrival of the so-called Zwickau prophets who claimed immediate revelation from God and attempted to hasten further reforms. All this was followed by the anarchy of the Peasants' War (which ended in May 1525) and Melanchthon's unease at radical Anabaptist practices that he discovered while on a visitation in Thuringia (in the summer of 1527). These events brought home the neces-

sity for civil peace and order, and for the rule of law.<sup>15</sup> This was not something that Melanchthon had ever questioned, but the activities of radicals made renewed emphasis on peace and order as divine goods a necessity.

With respect to the internal cause for Melanchthon's change: this can, I think, be attributed to his developing understanding and more forceful utilization of the distinction between the Law and the Gospel. Melanchthon had early on embraced Protestant teaching and vigorously supported Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone, that is, of God's free forgiveness of sins to those who trust in Christ. Because "philosophy" had become so embroiled in questions of theology and of righteousness before God and had been given, in Melanchthon's mind, an adjudicatory role to play in resolving those questions, the philosophers—by which we here mean Aristotle and especially his scholastic interpreters—<sup>16</sup> had

to be opposed, as obscuring the gospel. In the 1520s, he seems to have come to a deeper and more clarified recognition of the fact that the Lutheran gospel did not necessitate an opposition to philosophical study after all; such study simply had to be put in its proper place. The gospel, to repeat, is the announcement of God's free forgiveness in Christ. Everything else is law. The gospel cannot be discovered by human reason or ingenuity—and in that sense philosophy has nothing to do with it. But that fact does not negate a positive role for philosophy and reason in every other aspect of human life. Provided that philosophy is kept to its proper sphere—that is, outside of the doctrine of salvation—it is a good and helpful thing.<sup>17</sup> The basic distinction between law and gospel is already present in the 1521 edition of the *Loci communes*, but Melanchthon deploys it to much greater effect and with greater profundity in the years that follow, giving the study of philosophy and the arts their place under this general rubric.

15. For the summary in this paragraph, see Sachiko Kusukawa, *The Transformation of Natural Philosophy: The Case of Philip Melanchthon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 51–65.

16. These two are obviously not the same, and one could argue that when Melanchthon refers to the former in theological contexts he very often (though not always) means the latter.

17. For an example of what Melanchthon is trying to avoid, cf. the following anecdote: "...[Theobald] Thamer came to Wittenberg in 1553 and presented his teaching before Melanchthon. Thamer had abandoned justification by faith alone in favor of the opinion that God was better recognized in the writings of Aristotle than the writings of Luther, because Aristotle contained all articles of faith in that he described the way to God as a way of virtue so that righteousness in God's sight was attained through proper behavior" (Kuroпка, "Melanchthon and Aristotle," 22).



LAW AND GRACE, 1529, BY LUCAS CRANACH THE ELDER

Thus Melanchthon's re-envisioning of philosophy as part of the realm of law allows it to be rescued for Christian re-purposing. I said above that the external and internal causes of the changes in Melanchthon's rhetoric about philosophy were related; let me now suggest how that is so. The radicalism of the Anabaptists and other troublemakers in the 1520s was caused by what was, for Melanchthon, a misunderstanding of justification by faith alone. That is, the radicals absolutized and externalized the freedom of the gospel in such a way that they claimed to be no longer subject to any human restraint or law. In Melanchthon's opinion, of course, this was to misunderstand both law and gospel. The gospel had to do with man's standing before God. By acceptance of it, the inner man was free from the penalty due for sin and the terror of God's judgment. But man still had to live in the world, that is, in civil, temporal society. And civil, temporal society is not ruled by the gospel; it is ruled by law. When we remember that everything "not gospel" is "law," we can more easily see the new place he discovered for philosophy. For what does philosophy, for Melanchthon, do? It teaches us moral precepts; it teaches us about all of the arts; it teaches us about God's providence in the external world through nature and the motion of the heavenly bodies. Thus, as Sachiko Kusakawa has demonstrated in *The Transformation of Natural Philosophy*, philosophy is useful precisely for countering Anabaptist anarchy and an externalized understanding of the freedom of the gospel, for philosophy inculcates civil obedience and order in man's temporal life.<sup>18</sup> For Melanchthon, this is a great blessing: the law is the gift of God as well as the gospel.

As Melanchthon came to this more developed understanding, it is, interestingly, in the same verse of Colossians (2.8) referred to above in the preface to Aristophanes' *Clouds* that he found support—which is to say, support for his now more public advocacy

18. Kusakawa, *Transformation*, 27-74.

for the teaching of philosophy, including Aristotle, who became a regular focus of his from this point forward; philosophical study, as it turned out, was actually underwritten by the Bible. Melanchthon's intense reflection on this verse is apparent from key sources from the mid to late 1520s, in which his sharpened reading of the passage is evident.

## MELANCHTHON ON COL. 2.8 AND THE ETHICS OF ARISTOTLE

In 1526-7, "Melanchthon's duties in the theological faculty of the University of Wittenberg included lecturing on Paul's letter to the Colossians."<sup>19</sup> From this period we have a disputation on Col. 2.8 ("See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ") in which he makes his new understanding of the import of the verse clear. The theses of this disputation, called "On the Distinction between the Gospel and Philosophy,"<sup>20</sup> begin as follows:

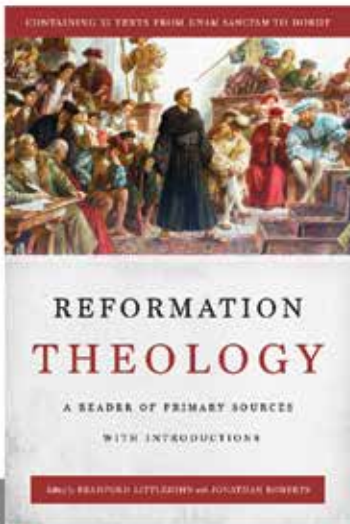
When Paul says: 'See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy', he does not reject philosophy but its abuse—just as, when someone says: 'Take care not to be ensnared by wine', he does not disparage wine but its abuse.<sup>21</sup>

So it is not philosophy itself that is problematic, but a perversion of philosophy. This occurs when the Gospel is transformed

19. Timothy J. Wengert, *Human Freedom, Christian Righteousness: Philip Melanchthon's Exegetical Debate with Erasmus of Rotterdam* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998), 14.

20. The disputation is available in English in Philip Melanchthon, *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, edited by Sachiko Kusakawa and translated by Christine F. Salazar (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 23-5. I quote Salazar's translation herein.

21. Melanchthon, *Orations*, 23.



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“into philosophy, that is, the teaching of human reason.”<sup>22</sup> But philosophy is not about the gospel. Rather, it “contains the art of rhetoric, physiology and precepts on civic morals.”<sup>23</sup> Indeed, it is “a good creation of God, and the principal among all natural gifts,”<sup>24</sup> one that is necessary as long as we live in what Melanchthon calls “this corporal and civil life.”<sup>25</sup> And as far as that life and civic morals are concerned, “moral philosophy,” says Melanchthon, “is the very law of God.”<sup>26</sup> So too in the world of nature: “That philosophy is the law of God can also be understood from the fact that it is the knowledge of natural causes and effects, and since these are things arranged by God, it follows that philosophy is the law of God, which is the teaching of the divine order.”<sup>27</sup> It is even the case that Aristotle is the best representative of such philosophizing, because he makes most use of demonstrations.<sup>28</sup> “And,” he goes on, “[Aristotelian philosophy] judges correctly about the purpose of moral goods and the nature of virtue, *at least if it is understood as being about civic life and civic virtues*”—<sup>29</sup>a proviso he believed was not observed by late medieval or contemporary scholastics. (One might note in passing that this renders Brad Gregory’s recent claim that Aristotelian virtue ethics was “repudiat[ed] by early modern Lutherans [and] Reformed Protestants”<sup>30</sup> rather strange.) Because, moreover, philosophy is part of “law,” it forms a seamless whole with the revelation of the moral law in Scripture: “[Divine law and philosophy] agree with each other just as the Decalogue and the law of nature agree, because philosophy—to the extent that it has demonstrations—is the law of nature itself.”<sup>31</sup>

With the civil life here in view, the gospel does not conflict at all: “[I]f anyone takes away from the Gospel any law on civic life that conflicts with philosophy or the laws of the emperors, he should immediately be despised.”<sup>32</sup> The gospel, on the other hand, is not a new law (*pace* Aquinas),<sup>33</sup> or a law at all. As Melanchthon says, “The Gospel is not a philosophy or a law, but it is the forgiveness of sins and the promise of reconciliation and eternal life for the sake of Christ, and human reason by itself cannot apprehend any of these things.”<sup>34</sup> That is a crucial point: “*human reason by itself can-*

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 24.

28. Ibid., 25. Karkkainen, “Philosophy,” 195, notes Aristotle’s increasing importance for Melanchthon in this period while also emphasizing Cicero’s influence: “During this phase, Melanchthon began to consider Aristotle as the methodological ideal for teaching ethics and politics, without dismissing Cicero as the authority in the discussion on virtues.” Melanchthon had substituted Cicero’s *On Duties* for Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* for the teaching of moral philosophy in 1526 (see Kuroпка, “Melanchthon and Philosophy,” 18), but this change was not permanent: Aristotle becomes extremely significant not only for method, but also for content, as his *Philosophiae Moralis Epitome* and his commentaries on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* make clear. For a recent treatment of Cicero in the Reformation, see Carl P.E. Springer, *Cicero in Heaven: The Roman Rhetor and Luther’s Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

29. Melanchthon, *Orations*, 25, emphasis mine.

30. Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 185.

31. Ibid., though he remarks that the precepts of the Decalogue are “clearer.”

32. Ibid., 23.

33. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I-II, Q. 106.

34. Melanchthon, *Orations*, 24.

*not apprehend any of these things*”; it is that point that Melanchthon above all desires to protect. There is a distinction between divine righteousness and civil righteousness that must ever be observed.<sup>35</sup> Civil righteousness is for Melanchthon a great good; it is also one that has nothing whatsoever to do with justification before God. As long as this is kept clear, philosophy can and must be employed.

Melanchthon expands on his thoughts in a *dissertatio* on Col. 2.8 that was published in 1527,<sup>36</sup> which itself was extended in a commentary on Colossians first published also in 1527 (the *Scholia*),<sup>37</sup> and was then extended yet further in a second edition in 1528<sup>38</sup> (there were more additions and editions that followed).<sup>39</sup> Though there are expansions, the substance of the argument on Col. 2.8 is stable in both the *dissertatio* and the 1527 and 1528 commentaries, and it is on that that I shall focus here.<sup>40</sup>

Melanchthon’s discussion of the usefulness of philosophy in this *dissertatio* and in the commentary’s entry for 2.8 is predicated on the law/gospel distinction discussed above. Paul’s purpose in this verse, Melanchthon says, is to “compar[e] human with Christian righteousness”<sup>41</sup> and to see both how God requires human righteousness and how, in another sense, he condemns it. When he says “human righteousness” (*humana iustitia*) here, he means the same thing referred to with the phrase “civil righteousness” above. As we saw there, this means that it is part of law, not gospel; it is part of man’s “external” life in the world, not his “internal” life before God, and thus needs to be distinguished from Christian righteousness.

Insofar as philosophy speaks to man’s natural or social life, it is a good—in fact, for Melanchthon it is a creature and gift of God (*vera et bona creatura Dei*).<sup>42</sup> Thus he believes that texts such as Romans 2.15,<sup>43</sup> Romans 1.25,<sup>44</sup> and 1 Timothy 4.1–5<sup>45</sup> give the

35. Cf. *Augsburg Confession* 18 (“Of Free Will”), and the *Defense of the Augsburg Confession* on that same article (both by Melanchthon).

36. *Philippi Melanchthonis in locum ad Colossenses: Videte ne quis vos decipiat per philosophiam inanem, dissertatio* (Basil: Adamus Petrus, 1527). The text can be found in *Corpus Reformatorum* 12, 691–6.

37. *Scholia in Epistolam Pauli ad Colossenses* (Hagenau: Ioannes Secerius, 1527). This version of the commentary has been translated into English: Philip Melanchthon, *Paul’s Letter to the Colossians*, translated by D.C. Parker (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989).

38. *Scholia in Epistolam Pauli ad Colossenses* (Wittenberg: Josef Klug, 1528).

39. For the publication history, see Wengert, *Human Freedom*, 14–20, 159–61.

40. It should be remarked in passing that one of the reasons I chose quotations from Erasmus above, rather than other opponents such as Iohannes Cochlaeus, is that Wengert has convincingly shown that Melanchthon’s commentary on Colossians is a subtle and many-pronged attack on Erasmus, though Erasmus is never named. I will not be focusing on that aspect of the text here, but it is worth noting. See Wengert, *Human Freedom*, passim.

41. See CR 12, 692 for the *dissertatio*; Melanchthon, *Paul’s Letter*, 46, for the 1527 commentary; *Scholia* (Wittenberg), 22, for the 1528 commentary.

42. CR 12, 692. The language is retained in the 1527 and 1528 commentaries.

43. “[The Gentiles] 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” (I quote the *ESV* for convenience). Melanchthon, *Paul’s Letter*, 46 (for the reader’s convenience, I will give references to the 1527 commentary because it is available in English).

44. I.e., Paul’s reference to “the truth about God.” Melanchthon, *Paul’s Letter*, 48.

45. “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is

warrant for and, moreover, a commandment for the use of philosophy. What is included in “philosophy,” in this sense of the word? It should be noted that Melanchthon here does not mean metaphysics. Rather, he means things such as the following: medicine (the study of bodies), which includes astrology (!); astronomy; moral philosophy; and eloquence, which includes grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric.<sup>46</sup> In other words, he essentially means the “liberal arts.” As long as philosophy is kept within proper bounds—the regulation of man’s bodily and civil life—it should be praised.

Is the division between philosophy and sacred studies really so airtight as it seems? Yes and no, or rather no and yes. “No,” in the following way: the study of nature (and particularly the study of eloquence) is absolutely necessary for understanding Sacred Scripture—the very Scripture that permits and commands the use of philosophy for Melanchthon—for without some knowledge of languages, grammar, dialectic, and rhetoric, one can neither accurately understand nor expound the teaching of Scripture. In fact, this is what Melanchthon says Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 12 and 14 when he instructed the Corinthians to “exercise the gift of tongues.”<sup>47</sup> And so philosophy is useful for understanding the content of Scripture that is already “there” in the text: Melanchthon takes it to be obvious that with the right tools a text can be understood, but also that those tools are requisite for such understanding.<sup>48</sup>

Where philosophy goes wrong is when it ceases to be a handmaid and instead attempts to generate its own content in divine matters, that is, when it is not governed by the Word in the sphere of theology. Reason and philosophy may not invent their own ideas about God but must derive and explicate their conceptions of God from his own Word; reason and philosophy must rather be servants to theology. Melanchthon then identifies three areas in particular in which philosophy goes astray, that is, does not follow his advice. Philosophy or reason errs, first, when speaking about how the world is governed or about God’s counsels. “The nature of man,” he says, “can affirm nothing about God’s will. We can only learn about that from the Word of God.”<sup>49</sup> Second—and this is crucial, if you will

forgive the pun—“philosophy errs with regard to justification.”<sup>50</sup> Melanchthon believes that philosophers such as Aristotle teach that civil righteousness is sufficient for God—that natural virtue is a cause of God’s favor. But the Word says that “righteousness before God consists in faith in Christ.”<sup>51</sup> Finally, philosophy errs in teaching that “the reason has enough strength of its own to resist vices”<sup>52</sup> and therefore dispenses with the need of the Holy Spirit for Christian virtue. As Timothy Wengert has shown, then, Melanchthon is opposed to the muddying of the Christian doctrines of the divine will, of justification, and of sanctification: that is, the primary errors have a Trinitarian shape (divine will/Father, justification/Son, sanctification/Spirit),<sup>53</sup> though Melanchthon does not make that pattern explicit. It is these specific areas in which someone might be taken captive by philosophy against Paul’s command.

But none of these errors negates the fundamental benefit of philosophy, which, when distinguished from the gospel, “can...form correct judgements about the nature of reality and about social morals.”<sup>54</sup> Thus Melanchthon can say: “This is not to say that Christian doctrine does away with social morals. It requires them, and approves of the philosophy or theory of laying down precepts that concern social morality.”<sup>55</sup> Such activity just must not be confused with the Gospel. This is what Paul’s statement in 2 Timothy 2.15 about “rightly dividing

the Word of truth” means;<sup>56</sup> the Word itself, properly understood, gives the grounds for the investigation and explication of natural law and social morality. The Protestant Scripture principle provides the foundation for the investigation and explication of natural, ethical, and political philosophy, all of which, for Melanchthon, are part of the domain of “law” (as opposed to “gospel”). “Law” is the realm of nature and general revelation, equally applicable in all times and places. Thus there is no peculiarly “Christian” form of state—this supposition Melanchthon rejects as revolutionary radicalism.<sup>57</sup> Civic order varies from polity to polity and is a matter

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received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.” Melanchthon, *Paul’s Letter*, 48. He also quotes, e.g., Sirach.

46. Melanchthon, *Paul’s Letter*, 48–52. This section is greatly expanded from the 1527 *dissertatio*.

47. *Ibid.*, 51.

48. Melanchthon would later forcefully argue for philosophy’s importance for theology in his 1536 oration “On Philosophy”: see Melanchthon, *Orations*, 126–32.

49. Melanchthon, *Paul’s Letter*, 53. Though this statement is generalizing, when Melanchthon speaks this way he customarily means that human reason can know nothing of God’s *saving* will. Compare the following from the preface to his 1529 commentary on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*: “Philosophy relates nothing about the will of God, nothing about the remission of sins, nothing about fear or about faith toward God. It only

teaches the precepts that concern the external and civil mode of life, such as the public laws of political bodies. But the gospel expounds to us the will of God, it remits sins, it promises the Holy Spirit, who sanctifies the hearts of the pious and brings them to eternal life” (*In Ethica Aristotelis commentarius* [Wittenberg: Josef Klug, 1529], sig. A4r; cf. CR 16, 280. The translations of all passages from this work are my own; for more on this text, see below.

50. Melanchthon, *Paul’s Letter*, 53.

51. *Ibid.*, 53–4.

52. *Ibid.*, 54.

53. Wengert, *Human Freedom*, 84.

54. Melanchthon, *Paul’s Letter*, 55.

55. *Ibid.*, 54.

56. Cf. Wengert, *Human Freedom*, 86.

57. This does not mean that Melanchthon was not an establishmentarian or theocrat; he was. But that is not my topic here.

for enlightened and reflective prudence; statesmen, then, should make full use of, for example, the traditions of Roman law and Greek and Roman ethics, in addition to the ethical teaching of the Bible, in determining and preserving a legitimate social order, which Christians citizens are bound to obey.

We can observe Melanchthon's position in other works from the same period. For example, in the preface to his first attempt at a commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, published in 1529, in which Melanchthon again rigorously distinguishes between philosophy and the gospel, he writes that "that knowledge itself, which, inborn in men's minds, philosophers apprehend, is the gift of God, as Paul teaches in Romans 2."<sup>58</sup> Later in the preface, he remarks, "From what I have said above, it can easily be understood that philosophy does not conflict with the gospel—nay, rather, just as it is right to obey public laws, so it is right to obey the precepts of philosophy, and the precepts are approved of in the second chapter of Romans, for Paul calls them the truth of God."<sup>59</sup> Therefore Scripture itself once again demonstrates that the commands of philosophy should be obeyed, and that to refuse to do so is to disobey God.

To sum up: the Christian faith teaches that no one can reach true blessedness by following the precepts of moral philosophy, nor can one reach saving knowledge of God through philosophical investigation—such are the effects of the Fall. God provides the remedy in the gospel, the divine message of the forgiveness of sins. Human reason can never attain to this truth, and so God graciously reveals it. But such a position does not eliminate philosophy and the arts from human life; it rather relativizes them and sets them in their proper relationship to the gospel. For the divine revelation comes

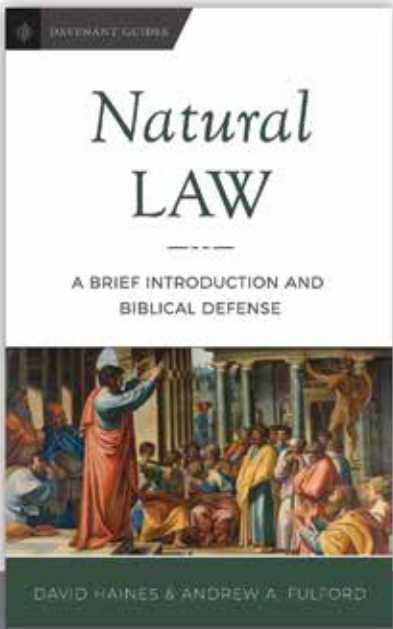
in two forms: law and gospel. By finding a home for philosophy under the rubric of "law" and the regulation of our temporal, civic lives, its value is retained. Indeed, we can then see it for what it is: a good creature of God, albeit not one that redeems us. That is the prerogative of God's grace in the gospel alone. If the liberal arts cannot save one's soul, it is no great loss; that is not their design. It is enough to say that God cares for his creation as such and our lives in this world, and gives us his good gifts of reason, philosophy, and the arts and sciences to teach, protect, and preserve us in this life. And they really are pedagogical: not only do they show to us true things about God and the world; they show us—particularly moral philosophy—our own shortcomings and vices, and thus form a seamless whole with the gospel that gives us the remedy for those vices. Therefore the Scripture principle, *sola scriptura*, a correct understanding of righteousness before God via justification *sola fide*, and the law/gospel dialectic as a controlling paradigm for discerning God's ways in the world together provide a way of understanding and appropriating the best of classical wisdom together with a chastened and modest sense of what it can, and cannot, do. Far from being at odds with moral philosophy and the liberal arts, these theological principles, in magisterial Protestant understanding, actually supply the warrant for moral philosophy and the arts—the study and practice of which are required to ensure civil order and social peace for man in his political aspect, and to give glory to God for the goodness of his creation.

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58. Melanchthon, *In Ethica Aristotelis*, sig. A2v.

59. *Ibid.*, sigs. A5r-v.



**Natural LAW**  
A BRIEF INTRODUCTION AND BIBLICAL DEFENSE  
DAVID HAINES & ANDREW A. FULFORD

*"They show that the*  
**WORK OF THE LAW**  
*is written on their hearts..." —Romans 2:15*

AS CHRISTIANS, we affirm that Scripture is our supreme guide to truth and righteousness. Some wish to go further and assert that it is our only guide. But how then can we account for the remarkable insight and moral integrity that many unbelievers seem to display? Enter the doctrine of natural law.

*"Fulford and Haines have provided an outstanding work that must get a wide readership if Christians are to re-engage the public square thoughtfully and appropriately. . . . I thank God for Fulford and Haines who took great effort and much time to serve the church with this resource."*  
—J.P. Moreland, Talbot School of Theology

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# NATURAL THEOLOGY IN REFORMED ORTHODOXY

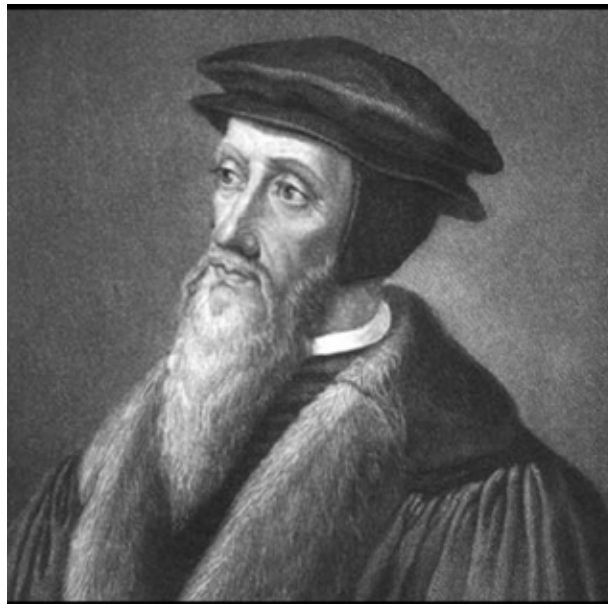
DAVID HAINES

## INTRODUCTION

In the first volume of his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Francis Turretin (1623-1687) responds to the question of whether or not Natural Theology may be granted, by noting that “Our controversy here is with the Socinians who deny the existence of any such natural theology or knowledge of God...The orthodox, on the contrary, uniformly teach that there is a natural theology, partly innate (derived from the conscience by means of common notions [*koinas ennoias*]) and partly acquired (drawn from the book of creatures discursively).”<sup>1</sup> Francis Turretin goes on to enumerate the traditional arguments in favor of Natural Theology, and responds to many of the critiques. Turretin seems to be saying, in this quote, that in order to be orthodox one must teach that “there is a natural theology”. We would agree with this statement, as it can indeed be shown that the doctrine of Natural Theology is a necessary element of Reformed Orthodoxy; that is, in order to be fully orthodox one must accept the doctrine of Natural Theology, as traditionally articulated. But, how was the doctrine of Natural Theology “traditionally articulated”?

Our purpose in this article is to provide a clear outline of how some of the most important early reformed theologians, and confessions, articulated their understanding of Natural Theology. To respect space constraints, we will limit our analysis primarily to John Calvin (1509-1564), Theodore Beza (1519-1605), Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499-1562), Girolamo Zanchi (1516-1590), Franciscus Junius (1545-1602), John Davenant (1572-1641), and Francis Turretin. We will also take note, in passing, of some of the more authoritative Reformed documents and councils, such as the *French Confession of Faith* (1559), the *Canons of the Synod of Dort* (1618-1619), and the *Westminster Confession* (1646). This particular array of Reformed theologians and confessions, all temporally situated between 1500 and 1700, will provide us with an in depth look at how Natural Theology was articulated and understood during the foundational period of Reformed theology. Interestingly enough, this selection of Reformed theologians

will provide a powerful corrective for a false, and misleading, comment made by K. Scott Oliphint in his recent book on Thomas Aquinas. He states, that “According to Thomas, there is much truth that can be acquired and demonstrated without any need of revelation, and then there are truths that can only be had by way of special revelation. But this paradigm was rightly rejected during the time of the Reformation and in seventeenth-century Protestant theology.”<sup>2</sup> Oliphint’s statement is representative of a common, but, as we will see, demonstrably false interpretation of the views of the early reformers.



JOHN CALVIN, 16TH CENTURY, ARTIST UNKNOWN

For our purposes, *Natural Theology* may be defined as that part of philosophy<sup>3</sup> which explores that which man can know about God (his existence, divine nature, etc.) from nature,<sup>4</sup> *via* his divinely bestowed faculty of reason; and, this, unaided by any divinely inspired written revelation from any religion; and, this, without presupposing the truth of any one religion. In order to trace the development, and discover the role, of natural theology within the works of these thinkers, we will draw out their responses to a number of questions concerning what man can know about God, how he knows it, and the relative effect and use of this knowledge.

## WHAT IS MEANT BY “KNOWLEDGE OF GOD”?

Reformed theologians have traditionally distinguished between various types of human knowledge about God, based upon the differing effects of that knowledge, the sources of that knowledge, and, even, the possessor of that knowledge. It is generally conceded, first

2. K. Scott Oliphint, *Thomas Aquinas* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), 78. I came across Oliphint’s recent book shortly after submitting this article to the journal, and the editors agreed that it would be important to draw attention to Oliphint’s comment (which comes up at least twice in the book, *Ibid.*, 32-34.), as this paper responds directly to this error. This article will demonstrate, *contra* Oliphint, that this paradigm was rightly maintained during the time of the Reformation and in seventeenth-century Protestant theology!

3. It might be noted, at this point, that there is no unanimous opinion on how to properly classify Natural Theology. Franciscus Junius, for example, sees Natural theology as a part of theology (cf. Franciscus Junius, *A Treatise on True Theology*, trans. David C. Noe (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014), 141-143.

4. *Nature*, here, is broadly defined as the observable universe.

1. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 1: 6.

of all, that by “knowledge of God”, we mean, at least, knowledge about the existence and attributes of God—that, and that which, God is; but, also, knowledge concerning God’s plan for fallen humanity, and that knowledge of God which is necessary for the ultimate salvation of man. John Calvin, for example, states that, “By knowledge of God, I understand that by which we not only conceive that there is some God, but also apprehend what it is for our interest, and conducive to his glory, what, in short, it is befitting to know concerning him.”<sup>5</sup> For Calvin, then, knowledge of God is not only knowledge that God is, nor just of what God does, but, knowledge of what He has revealed to us about Himself, and our relation to him, in his divinely inspired word. This is even more evident in Calvin’s statement, on the same page, that “it is one thing to perceive that God our Maker supports us by his power, rules us by his providence, fosters us by his goodness, and visits us with all kinds of blessings, and another thing to embrace the grace of reconciliation offered to us in Christ.”<sup>6</sup>

In this final statement, we see the most fundamental distinction which the early reformers made concerning human knowledge about God: knowledge of God as Creator, and knowledge of God as Redeemer.<sup>7</sup> Calvin’s distinction, though worded differently, is also found in the second article of *the French Confession of Faith*, which was approved by Calvin, Theodore Beza, Pierre Viret, and all those theologians and Christian leaders who were in attendance at the Synod of La Rochelle in 1571. Here, the distinction is between that knowledge of God which is revealed in God’s works, and that knowledge of God which is revealed in divinely inspired Scriptures.<sup>8</sup> Other early declarations, such as the *Canons of the Synod of Dort* and the *Westminster Confession*, distinguish between the natural light, by which humans know something of the existence and nature of God, and divine revelation in scriptures.<sup>9</sup>

We find the very same distinction expressed differently in Vermigli’s *Common Places*, where he states that “we must understand that

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OF THE CHURCH.”

5. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (2007; repr., Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2012), 7.

6. *Ibid.*

7. This is an important distinction for Calvin. Cf. *Ibid.*, 7, 8, etc.

8. “The French Confession of Faith”, in *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, vol. 3 of *The Creeds of Christendom: with a History and Critical Notes*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff (1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 360.

9. “The Canons of the Synod of Dort, A.D. 1619”, in *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, vol. 3 of *The Creeds of Christendom: with a History and Critical Notes*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff (1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 588. “The Westminster Confession of Faith, 1647”, in *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, vol. 3 of *The Creeds of Christendom: with a History and Critical Notes*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff (1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 600. The term “Natural light” was a common way of talking about the divinely bestowed faculty of reason, that is “natural reason”.

the knowledge of God is of two sorts: the one effectual, whereby we are changed, so that we endeavor to express in works those things that we know; (and this knowledge of God, the holy Scriptures ascribe unto the godly alone:) but the other, is a cold knowledge, whereby we are made never a-whit the better.”<sup>10</sup> Calvin’s knowledge of God as Redeemer is roughly the equivalent of Vermigli’s *effectual* knowledge of God. Note that they both claim that there is another type of human knowledge about God which is common to all men: Calvin’s knowledge of God as Creator, and Vermigli’s *cold* knowledge. Junius uses terms which are quite familiar to us, to

describe the very same distinction: Natural Theology and Supernatural Theology.<sup>11</sup> Junius articulates his understanding of Natural Theology—true knowledge of God which is revealed to humans in the created universe—using the four Aristotelian causes (material, formal, efficient, and final) to explain the nature of this natural knowledge of God.<sup>12</sup>

Our survey of early Reformed literature reveals that the early Reformers, both in their individual writings and in their confessions, taught that there is a certain knowledge of God which is discovered, by the natural light, in creation, and that there is a deeper, effective, supernaturally saving knowledge of God which is revealed in scriptures. The first level includes knowledge of the truth

that God exists, is the creator of all things, and rules all things by his providence, goodness and grace. The second level, which they both describe as more important, is knowledge of God as the saviour of those who believe in Christ’s work on the cross. The truth claims of the second level of our knowledge of God are ontologically dependent upon the truth of the claims of the first level. That is, unless God exists, is the creator of all things, and rules all things by his providence, goodness and grace, it is not possible for God to be our saviour. Also, that we believe the truth claims of the second level implies that we already either know, or believe, the truth claims of the first level. That is, if I do not, at very least, believe (even by blind faith) that God exists, is the creator of all things, and rules all things by his providence, goodness and grace, then I cannot, in any way, believe that God is my Saviour.

10. Pietro Martyr Vermigli, *Common Places*, trans. Anthonie Marten (1574), 13. I updated, slightly, the English in this quotation.

11. Junius, *TTT*, 141-143. Francis Turretin makes the very same distinction in his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992-97), 1:6-9.). Jonathan Edwards makes a similar distinction between what he calls Natural Religion or Divinity and Supernatural Religion or Divinity (cf. Jonathan Edwards, “Knowledge of Divine Truth”, in *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, ed. Kinnach, Minkema, and Sweeney (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 29-30. Jonathan Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light”, in *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, ed. Kinnach, Minkema, and Sweeney (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 123-125, 136-137.).

12. Junius, *TTT*, 145-146.

## CAN HUMANS EVEN KNOW GOD?

The fact that there are two sources which reveal truth about God, however, does not imply that humans can obtain that truth. The question that we must now ask is, “Can man attain to some knowledge of God?” To this question, all of the early reformers reply, in unison “Yes!” Not only can the regenerated man attain to knowledge of God through both nature and scripture, but the unregenerate man can also attain some knowledge of God.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, as is well known and attested, Calvin claims that all men, regenerate and unregenerate, have within them the *sensus divinitatis* (the sense of deity). He states, for example, “That there exists in the human minds and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of deity, we hold to be beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any man from pretending ignorance, has endued all men with some idea of his Godhead, the memory of which he constantly renews and occasionally enlarges, that all to a man being aware that there is a God, and that he is their Maker, may be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship him nor consecrate their lives to his service.”<sup>14</sup> Note, first of all, that Calvin clearly states that God himself constantly “renews and occasionally enlarges” this sense of deity in all men. That is, though a man may attempt to diminish, destroy, and drown out the sense of deity that God has implanted in his mind, God does not allow him to get rid of it, but constantly brings it back. It should also be noted that this *sensus divinitatis* makes man “aware that there is a God, and that he is their maker”. This phrase brings out the point that this is not some vague (almost invisible) knowledge of God, but that man is actually “aware” of two very distinct and pointed facts: 1) there is a God, and 2) this God is my maker.<sup>15</sup> For Calvin, whether or not man accepts these two truth statements, he knows them. It is also important to note the following statement about whether or not man can know something of God. “I only wish to observe here that this method of investigating the divine perfections, by tracing the lineament of his countenance as shadowed forth in the firmament and on the earth, is common both to those within and to those without the pale of the church.”<sup>16</sup> This important claim not only shows that Calvin thought that it was possible to know something of God through rational observation of his creation, but also, that this knowledge was possible for all men, whether they be regenerate or unregenerate.

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13. Calvin, *ICR.*, 4.

14. *Ibid.*, 9. Cf. *Ibid.*, 10.

15. We will come back to the *content* of man’s knowledge of God later. The point here is to bring to evidence that, for Calvin, the *sensus divinitatis* has a distinct and clear content that can be formulated in a truth statement and either accepted or rejected as true.

16. *Ibid.*, 20.

That this understanding of the natural knowledge of God was common in the writings of the early Reformers can be demonstrated by noting, for example, that, for Vermigli, all humans can obtain to some knowledge of God, but, that it is especially the philosophers and the wisest of the pagans who actually obtained this knowledge. Indeed, Vermigli notes that not all humans actually obtain this natural knowledge of God, though it is available to all. He says, “And whereas it is written: *It was made manifest in them*: neither is it said, In all: the Scripture doth sever the wise and the philosophers, from the barbarous and unskillful multitude. For all things were not known to all alike: which nevertheless happened by the fault of these philosophers.”<sup>17</sup> Vermigli later notes that Plato and Aristotle were essentially used by God to make known those truths about God which could be discovered in nature.<sup>18</sup>

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Junius also teaches that this natural knowledge of God is available to all, through the natural light of reason.<sup>19</sup> Theodore Beza also states, quite clearly, that “in these visible creatures we may behold the invisible things of God, so that in this only respect, if there were nothing else, this book is to be esteemed as an incomparable treasure, and daily to be read and meditated of us.”<sup>20</sup> John Davenant, an influential second generation reformer, also teaches that philosophy can, by the light of the natural reason, attain to certain truths about God. Indeed, says Davenant, “philosophy is the offspring of right reason: and this light of reason is infused into the human mind by God himself.”<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly enough, it can be conclusively demonstrated that the Puritans, a group of Reformed theologians who lived between the 1550s and the 1700s, almost all taught that all humans, regenerate and unregenerate, can come to obtain some knowledge about God through their rational observations of the created universe. Wallace W. Marshall, in a recently published work on the subject says that, of over 70 different Puritan authors, “The overwhelming majority of Puritan theologians were firm believers in the legitimacy of natural theology and evidentialism. Even the small minority of dissenters did not categorically reject natural theology but merely expressed reservations about its usefulness.”<sup>22</sup> Take, for example,

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17. Vermigli, *CP*, 11. I updated, somewhat, this English translation of Vermigli.

18. *Ibid.*, 12. Beza also frequently refers to Plato and Aristotle as helpful to the Christian faith.

19. Junius, *TTT*, 145-146.

20. Theodore Beza, *Job: Expounded by Theodore Beza, partly in manner of a Commentary, partly in manner of a paraphrase* (London: John Legatt, printer of the University of Cambridge, 1589), 354. (These page numbers refer to the pdf document of Beza’s commentary, as there are no page numbers in the actual document.)

21. John Davenant, *An Exposition of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians*, trans. Josiah Allport (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1831), 1: 390.

22. Wallace W. Marshall, *Puritanism and Natural Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 6.

the well-known, and highly respected work of Stephen Charnock (1628-1680). In his book *The Existence and Attributes of God*, he clearly states, “The light of nature tells us there is a God; the gospel gives us a more magnificent report of him; the light of nature condemns gross atheism, and that of the gospel condemns and conquers spiritual atheism in the hearts of men.”<sup>23</sup> The Puritans simply continued to teach and develop the very same doctrine, concerning natural knowledge of God, that they received from the early Reformers. Even Martin Luther, who is often portrayed as the avowed enemy of philosophy and natural theology, in his commentary on Romans 1:19, says, “This statement [‘The invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen’] tells us that from the beginning of the world the invisible things of God have always been recognized through the rational perception of the (*divine*) operations (*in the world*).”<sup>24</sup>

The *Canons of the Synod of Dort* state very clearly that “There remain, however, in man since the fall, the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the difference between good and evil...”<sup>25</sup>

This statement reminds us of Francis Turretin’s declaration concerning natural knowledge of God, when he notes that Natural Theology refers not only to that knowledge of God which humans had prior to the fall, but, also, to that knowledge of God which all humans can obtain since the fall.<sup>26</sup> This brings up a difficult question which has caused no end of debate in relationship to Natural Theology, that is, how does the fall affect the human ability to know something true about God from nature alone? Much has been said on this issue, and some of the early Reformers were more cynical about the noetic effects of sin than others. Though we cannot go into great detail on this subject at this point, it might help to quote Vermigli on this question, “Wherefore Paul speaketh of that truth, which is naturally ingrafted in us, and also of that which we attain unto by our own study. For either of those instructed us of most excellent things touching God. Neither is the unrighteousness which we commit, able to blot

it out of our minds.”<sup>27</sup> Vermigli, at least, seems to think that sin has not so damaged man as to render him incapable of attaining to some knowledge of God through his reasoning about nature.

The evidence points, therefore, to the conclusion that an overwhelming majority of key Reformation theologians, and authoritative confessions, from the first two hundred years of the Reformation, teach that all humans can indeed attain to some knowledge of God through their rational observations of nature. It is to be noted that, following the distinction made in the previous section, that which can be known of the true God is different based upon the source of the knowledge. This brings us to our next question.

## THE SOURCES OF MAN'S KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

It is, therefore, obvious that Reformed theology, in at least the first two hundred years of the Reform, clearly teaches that humans can, and indeed do, attain to some knowledge about God. In light of what we have already seen it should also be obvious

that these Reformers also taught that there were at least two major sources from which all humans can obtain knowledge about God: Nature and Scripture.

In his *Institutes*, where chapter 5 is dedicated to God’s self-revelation in Creation and chapter 6 is dedicated to His self-revelation in Scriptures, Calvin clearly teaches that God reveals himself to man *in Nature*, in three ways: (1) through creation itself, (2) through human nature & human history, and (3) through God’s providential control of all of creation, including humans.<sup>28</sup> Take, for example, the following statement, “He [God] has been pleased, in order that none might be excluded from the means of obtaining felicity [“the perfection of blessedness [felicity] consists in the knowledge of God”], not only to deposit in our minds that seed of religion of which we have already spoken [the *sensus divinitatis*], but so to manifest his perfections in the whole structure of the universe, and daily place himself in our view, that we cannot open our eyes without being compelled to behold him. His essence, indeed, is incomprehensible, utterly transcending all human thought; but on each of his works his glory is engraved in characters so bright, so distinct, and so illustrious, that none, however dull and illiterate, can plead



SYNOD OF DORT, 1630, BY G. VAN HOVE

23. Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (1853; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 167.

24. Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (1954; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1979), 42.

25. “The Canons of the Synod of Dort, A.D. 1619”, in *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, vol. 3 of *The Creeds of Christendom: with a History and Critical Notes*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff (1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 588. The *Westminster Confession* is also very clear on this point.

26. Turretin, *IET*, 1:6.

27. Vermigli, *CP*, 15.

28. Calvin, *Institutes*, 20-22.

ignorance as their excuse.”<sup>29</sup> Here Calvin states that God has not only given, to all men (regenerate and unregenerate) the *sensus divinitatis*, but, on top of that, He also gives to all men, in nature (in all the things He has created), the proof of his existence and glory. This knowledge of God, attained through the contemplation of creation, is available to all men, everywhere, regenerate or not.

Calvin continues, “In attestation of his wondrous wisdom, both the heavens and the earth present us with innumerable proofs, not only those more recondite proofs which astronomy, medicine, and all the natural sciences are designed to illustrate, but proofs which force themselves on the notice of the most illiterate peasant, who cannot open his eyes without beholding them...No man, however, though he be ignorant of these [the more recondite proofs presented in the liberal studies and natural sciences proving the existence and attributes of God], is incapacitated for discerning such proofs of creative wisdom as may well cause him to break forth in admiration of the creator.”<sup>30</sup> In this quote we see two important claims. First of all, Calvin recognizes that man, through his scientific and philosophic study (natural reason) of creation (natural revelation), has discovered “innumerable proofs” of the existence and attributes of God. Calvin is most likely referring to the many proofs (arguments or demonstrations) for the existence and attributes of God that have been discovered, throughout the history of the church, by the likes of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and those who followed in their steps. Secondly, Calvin also recognizes that even if someone is unable to understand these arguments, many of which require years of in-depth study to grasp, he is still confronted with proof of God every time he considers creation. This quote makes it clear that Calvin thinks that man can attain knowledge of God through creation, and this either by simple observation, or by scientific and philosophical study. Calvin also notes that what is true concerning our observation of God’s creation is also true of our considerations of our very selves, “The same is true in regard to the structure of the human frame.”<sup>31</sup>

Vermigli teaches essentially the same thing when he notes that God reveals himself in (1) a naturally ingrafted knowledge of God—“And their knowledges of God being naturally ingrafted in us by God, are every day more and more confirmed and made perfect by the observation of things created.”;<sup>32</sup> (2) In creation—“And it is to be noted, that whereas God is a nature so dissevered from any matter, as he cannot sensibly be perceived; yet he has been accustomed by signs and certain sensible words to declare himself. And those signs, which from the beginning have declared God unto us are creatures.”;<sup>33</sup> (3) In human nature and the providential government of the universe—“All these things are so handled there, as they preach unto us the eternal power and divinity of God. But among other things, which so chiefly set forth God unto us, is the nature of our own selves. For we are made unto his own image and likeness.”;<sup>34</sup> and (4) in the conscience—“Moreover we see, that our consciences do naturally detest the wickedness that we have committed, and contrariwise rejoice and be glad at our well-doing. Which thing,

29. Ibid., 16.

30. Ibid., 16-17.

31. Ibid., 17.

32. Vermigli, *CP*, 11-12.

33. Ibid., 12.

34. Ibid.

seeing it is naturally grafted in us, we be taught that God’s judgment is to come.”<sup>35</sup> Vermigli concludes that “there can be nothing found in the world so abject and contemptible, which giveth not a testimony of God. Of Jupiter (said the Poet) all things are full. For whatsoever is in the world, so long as it is preserved, so long hath it the power of God hidden under it, which if by searching, art, and natural knowledge, it be discovered, will reveal God unto us.”<sup>36</sup>

This very same teaching is to be found, clearly articulated, in the *French Confession of Faith* (1559), the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), and even in the *Belgic Confession* (1561),<sup>37</sup> which clearly teaches that God makes himself known to man through creation and through scriptures.<sup>38</sup> Turretin teaches that this knowledge is not obtained through innate ideas (*contra* Plato),<sup>39</sup> but through the religious nature of man (Turretin’s interpretation of Calvin’s *Sensus Divinitatis*—an interpretation which seems to have been adopted by B. B. Warfield<sup>40</sup>),<sup>41</sup> and rational human observations of the created universe.<sup>42</sup> Junius explicitly mentions both the created universe, and human nature, as sources of natural knowledge about God.<sup>43</sup>

We might conclude, then, that all of the early Reformers would appear to agree with Calvin in stating that the most direct path and fittest method to learn about God, is to contemplate Him in creation, “Hence it is obvious, that in seeking God, the most direct path and the fittest method is, not to attempt to pry into his essence, which is rather to be adored than minutely discussed, but to contemplate him in his works, by which he draws near, becomes familiar, and in a manner communicates himself to us.”<sup>44</sup>

## THE CONTENT OF MAN’S KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Just what do the early Reformers think that man can know about God from nature? It is at this point that a distinction we mentioned above comes into play. This distinction—the Creator/Redeemer distinction—poses the limits of natural theology. Calvin seems to be articulating a fundamental distinction that has been commonly accepted throughout the entire history of the church,<sup>45</sup> and contin-

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. “The Belgic Confession, A.D. 1561”, in *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, vol. 3 of *The Creeds of Christendom: with a History and Critical Notes*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David S. Schaff (1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 383-436. Note that the Belgic Confession was, according to Schaff, “adopted by a Reformed Synod at Emden, 1571, and by the National Synod of Dort, 1619. (Ibid., 383.)” Schaff also notes that a Latin version of this confession was probably made available by Beza (Ibid.), which gives us further confirmation concerning Beza’s understanding of Natural Theology.

38. Ibid., 384.

39. Turretin, *IET*, 6. Turretin says that God gave innate knowledge to man (Ibid., 7.), but, this is to be understood not as platonic innate ideas, but, rather, as the potency to this knowledge (Cf. Ibid., 6.).

40. Cf. B. B. Warfield, “The Idea of Systematic Theology,” in *Studies in Theology*, vol. 9 of *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (1932; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2000), 58-59, 64.

41. Turretin, *IET*, 8.

42. Ibid., 6, 8.

43. Junius, *TTT*, 146-147, 151, 153.

44. Calvin, *ICR*, 21.

45. We find this very same distinction made, for example, in the very first article of the first question of Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*, where Aquinas clearly distinguishes be-

ued to be taught after Calvin.<sup>46</sup> From nature man can truly know many positive truths about God, such as, that God exists, is the creator of all things, and rules all things by his providence, goodness, and grace. He cannot, however, know that this God desires to be united with him – in other words, man cannot, from nature, know God as Redeemer and Saviour, only as Creator and Sovereign.

Calvin lists a number of the truths that all of humanity, from nature, can know about the one true God. We can, first of all, know his power.<sup>47</sup> Which is one of the attributes that Paul, in Romans 1:19–20, says that all unregenerate men know. Calvin does not, however, think that human knowledge of God stops with His power. Rather, “from the power of God we are naturally led to consider his eternity, since that from which all other things derive their origin must necessarily be self-existent and eternal.”<sup>48</sup> Calvin also thinks that man can naturally know of God’s goodness,<sup>49</sup> God’s majesty,<sup>50</sup> and God’s wisdom, about which he says, “The excellence of the divine wisdom is manifested in distributing everything in due season, confounding the wisdom of the world, and taking the wise in their own craftiness (1 Cor. 3:19); in short, conducting all things in perfect accordance with reason.”<sup>51</sup> Beza, in the dedication to his Commentary on the book of Job, notes that the invisible power and divine nature of God are clearly seen in creation.<sup>52</sup> He later suggests that a number of truths about God can be known “not only by infinite testimonies of the word of God, but also by the true and common notions and principles, which are naturally settled in all men’s



minds, concerning the knowledge of God, yea, and by the testimony of his own conscience.”<sup>53</sup> What are these truths? That God is the creator, governor and ruler of all that is, divine sovereignty, all things come about by the divine will, etc.<sup>54</sup>

Vermigli also proposed that humans are able to know a number of truths about God, “For by the very workmanship of this world, they knew God to be most mighty. Further, they knew by the beauty, show, and a distinction of all things, that so great a power was administered by a most high providence and wisdom. Also the commodity and profit of things created taught them the Majesty of God, which consisted chiefly in this, that he does good unto all things.”<sup>55</sup> Vermigli also notes that the philosophers recognized that God was

a Spirit which was fully separate from all matter.<sup>56</sup> He later notes that “As for these invisible things of God, which we perceive, they are innumerable; but they are all drawn to these three principles points: his power, his wisdom, and his goodness. The greatness of the things brought forth, the making of them of nothing, and the sudden making of them by the commandment of his only word, do infer his most mighty power. But the workmanship, the form,

the comeliness, and the singular disposition of them, do testify the wisdom of the maker. The profit which we gather of them, declare how great his goodness is.”<sup>57</sup> Davenant suggests that “The natural knowledge of spiritual things is obscure and feeble, extending only to the *existence* of those things. As, for instance, that there is a God, that there is a worship of God, that there is a blessedness for souls, reason and philosophy perceives.”<sup>58</sup> Turretin would agree that the content of this knowledge includes that God exists, that God is worthy of worship,<sup>59</sup> as well as the attributes of God,<sup>60</sup> and the fact that God is the creator and providential preserver of all of creation.<sup>61</sup> Even Martin Luther agrees that humans know, based upon the natural light of reason, some truths about the divine nature, such as his power, justice, immortality and goodness.<sup>62</sup>

tween that which man can know about God from nature (which is not sufficient to save man), and that which man can only know about God through divinely revealed scriptures (which is necessary for man’s salvation).

46. John Davenant, for example, clearly distinguishes between knowledge of God that is related to the proper worship of God, the salvation of man, human justification, reconciliation with God, etc.; and knowledge of God which can be obtained through natural reason. (Davenant, *EPC*, 391-392, 393.) The former is knowable only through divine revelation in scriptures, the latter is known even by philosophers. Other truths not knowable through the light of natural reason include, “what is to be determined concerning the mystery of the Trinity, the incarnation of Christ, the justification of a sinner, invocation of God, and his worship. (Ibid., 394.)” Jonathan Edwards made the very same distinction in his works (Cf. Edwards, *KDT*, 29.), as does Francis Turretin in the *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Cf. Turretin, *IET*, 1:8, 11-12, 17.)

47. Calvin, *ICR*, 20.

48. Ibid., 20. I am sincerely incapable of comprehending how Calvin could possibly hope to deduce God’s eternity and self-existence from His power. It certainly seems that the deduction should be the other way around. Be that as it may, we are not here considering the strength of his position, but, rather, we are simply explaining it.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., 21.

51. Ibid.

52. Beza, *Job*, Dedicatoire, A.3ff.

53. Ibid., 100.

54. Ibid., 100-101.

55. Vermigli, *CP*, 10-11.

56. Ibid., 11.

57. Ibid., 16.

58. Davenant, *EPC*, 393.

59. Turretin, *IET*, 1:8.

60. Ibid., 12.

61. Ibid., 11.

62. Luther, *CER*, 43. Junius appears to agree with this statement (Junius, *TTT*, 150.). Herman Bavinck concurs (Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Abridged in one volume, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 67, 70, 73, 159, 162.).

The list is not long, and certainly does not include all truths about God. What matters, however, is not *how much* humanity is able to know about God from nature, but the fact that, for the early reformers, all humans are *capable* of “truly” knowing something about God as they consider the things He has created, and how He providentially governs His creation. This knowledge, as far as the early reformers are concerned, is not reserved for the regenerate, but is even available to the unregenerate.

## THE EFFECT OF THIS KNOWLEDGE

In relation to the effect of this natural knowledge of God, it is necessary to distinguish between the positive and negative effects of this knowledge. Concerning the positive effect of this knowledge, we note that all the early reformers clearly state that humans arrive at some knowledge of the true God through nature. This is not knowledge of a false deity, but veritable knowledge about the one and only true God who is the creator and provident sovereign of the entire universe. However, rather than worship the one true God, men turn away from the creator and worship the creation. Vermigli notes, “They attained unto so much truth, as thereby they understood how to behave themselves towards God, and towards their neighbors, and yet withheld they the truth in unrighteousness.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, the negative effect of this knowledge, is that we are inexcusable, because, rather than worshiping God and living virtuously, we suppress this knowledge and live immorally. Vermigli notes that the purpose of this natural knowledge of God was not that we be condemned by it, but, rather, that by it, men know their creator; however, because of what we do with this natural knowledge of God we are declared “without excuse”. “Neither is it to be thought, that God granted unto them this excellent knowledge, to the end that they should be inexcusable; for that ensued by their own fault...if men will not be converted by God, they shall be condemned by the testimony and judgment of themselves.”<sup>64</sup> Calvin says, “The expression of David (Pss. 14:1, 53:1), ‘The fool has said in his heart, There is no God,’ is primarily applied to those who, as will shortly farther appear, stifle the light of nature, and intentionally stupefy themselves. We see many, after they have become hardened in a daring course of sin, madly banishing all remembrance of God...As a just punishment of the wicked, after they have closed their own eyes, God makes their hearts dull and heavy, and hence, seeing, they see not.”<sup>65</sup>

## CONCLUSION

We have seen that some of the most well-known and influential reformers, and most of the important documents which were created by the theologians of the Reformation, clearly affirm that all humans can attain to some knowledge of the true God who re-

veals Himself in nature, Holy Scriptures, and in the incarnation of the Son of God. Indeed, an honest examination of the history and development of Reformed theology demonstrates that there is a general continuity (though there are major changes throughout the years in the philosophical positions undergirding this doctrine) from the earliest reformers straight through to the end of the 1800s. Such is the continuity that we can say that the great majority of Reformed theologians, from the beginning of the Reform to the end of the 1800s,<sup>66</sup> taught a clear doctrine of Natural Theology. We wish to conclude by noting that this natural knowledge of God, whose purpose is primarily to reveal God (not condemn men), is useful and indeed necessary for Reformed orthodoxy.

Though the utility and necessity of this natural knowledge is not frequently discussed in the works of the early reformers, it should not be neglected. One of the positive uses of Natural Theology is that it guides us in our interpretation of scripture. It is *via* this natural knowledge of God that we affirm, in spite of many verses which seem to say the opposite, that God is immutable, impassible, immaterial, incorporeal, simple, and so on. Though this is not often mentioned in Reformed works, we may note Davenant’s comment to the effect that “The knowledge of philosophy is useful, nay, necessary to the clear understanding and perspicuous elucidation of many passages which every where occur in the sacred Scriptures.”<sup>67</sup> The Puritans during the 1600s and 1700s, such as Richard Baxter, used Natural Theology as a prevention and a remedy for Practical Atheism amongst Christians, who doubted the existence of God, and who through this doubt were led into sin;<sup>68</sup> as well as a warning to those who called themselves Christians and lived Christian lives, but were not,<sup>69</sup> and a *plaidoyer* to those skeptics and atheists, inviting them to accept the truth of Christianity.<sup>70</sup>

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66. We have considered the major theologians and doctrinal statements 1500s-1600s. Marshall has shown almost all, if not all, of the Puritans (Reformed theologians of the 1600s-1700s) taught Natural Theology, and it can be easily shown that the major theologians of the 1800s (such as the old Princetonians) also taught a robust doctrine of Natural Theology.

67. Davenant, *EPC*, 395. Cf. Richard Baxter, *The Spirit’s Witness to the Truth of Christianity*, in vol. 20 of *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (London: James Duncan, 1830), 180, 184.

68. Richard Baxter, *The Reasons of the Christian Religion*, in vol. 20 of *The Practical Works of Richard Baxter* (London: James Duncan, 1830), 443-447

69. *Ibid.*, 452-456.

70. *Ibid.*, 448-451.

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It goes without saying that the *Westminster Confession*, the *Belgic Confession*, etc. all agree with these claims.

63. Vermigli, *CP*, 15.

64. *Ibid.*, 14.

65. Calvin, *ICR*, 13.



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