

The Gospel & Cultural Transformation: Natural Law or God's Law?

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The current emphasis on the Gospel's power to renew cities and culture is a great positive. Nevertheless, it provokes an important question.

Let us assume that city and cultural renewal gain traction – which, increasingly, they will – the next question is how do we determine the ethics and laws by which a renewed and just society should be governed.

As a Christian you would expect that God's revelation in Scripture would be the source of a Christian ethic for the world, but not so, according to many.

Natural Law Defined

Much of contemporary Christianity, Protestant and Catholic, and even many in the Reformed stream in recent years, has stood against this view. Instead they advocate that 'natural law' should be the source for the ethics and laws of society.

Natural law theory asserts that, in the words of the American Declaration of Independence, human rights are inherently endowed by the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God". It also asserts that these rights can be deduced by human reason.

This is not just an academic debate; it has major ramifications for the building of a truly just and Christian society. Natural law theory has its roots in Aristotle (384-322 BC), flowing through to Cicero (106-43 BC), and advocated by Aquinas (AD 1225-1274), mainstreaming it into Roman Catholicism and, to a lesser degree, Anglicanism. It assumes the neutrality of autonomous reason in its ability to decide between good and evil (aka the Edenic Fall). A 'slight' problem you would think. The frontline of the spiritual battle is therefore both theological and legal. It is about being consistently Protestant. The underlying reason for the Reformation was not ecclesiological but epistemological—how we know what we know. Through the influence of Thomas Aquinas medieval Catholicism placed the authority of reason (Thomistic natural theology and law) – played out in the authority of the church – over the Scriptures. It was primarily to this that the Reformers protested. The supremacy of the church, the pope, and priest-craft – accompanied by its various historical corruptions (e.g. the selling of indulgences etc.) – was in fact the result of a faulty epistemology, of reason placed over revelation.

And so, in response we will weigh natural law theory against the biblical doctrines of man, revelation, the end, and most importantly, the doctrine of God.

Natural Law & the Doctrine of Man

First, natural law theory does not comport with a biblical doctrine of man. By assuming that reason is both neutral and able in its judgement between good and evil – that is, in determining what is true – is to reiterate humankind's original Fall. Represented by our first parents, man stood in judgement over God's verbal communication, autonomously determining the truth between two supposed equal hypotheses: God's—that eating of the tree would result in death versus Satan's—that rather it would make us like God (Gen 2-3). Man, presuming the neutrality of his autonomous reason, chose the latter: Satan's lie; consequently, transmitting to the human race a congenital rebellion against God that is not only ethical but also intellectual (Rom 5:12). In fact, the intellectual rebellion against God is inherently ethical.

Therefore, to be truly reformational and thus transformational – in both church and culture – demands that we be truly biblical; that we correctly understand the noetic (i.e. intellectual) effect of sin:

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their **thinking**, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools,

Romans 1:21–22

For the **mind** that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot.

Romans 8:7

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the **mind**, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

Ephesians 2:1–3

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in **mind**, doing evil deeds,

Colossians 1:21

This, the Reformers sought to do in the doctrine of 'total depravity'. Unfortunately the archaism of the word 'depravity' conjures the caricature of man as completely bestial. Rather, what this doctrine teaches is that man has been affected by sin in the totality of his being. This, therefore, includes his rational processes, his reason. Made in the image of God, man, in contrast to the animals, is rational, able to think and reason, both inductively and deductively. Nonetheless, while man can count, as Cornelius Van Til famously quipped, "he cannot account for counting". In other words man's reason is adept at investigating the universe, but not in interpreting it. This is where the sin bias affects reason in an arc away from God. While he can extract facts about the world, he stumbles by interpreting their origin as merely a random concurrence of atoms, resorting to the mindless notion of 'brute facts'—they just are. And, therefore, concluding the eternality of matter, he has no explanation for the universe—for the uniformity of physical laws, and for reason, predication, and logic itself.

Consequently, to assume the neutrality of man's autonomous reason is a folly. If man misconstrues the facts of the physical universe, how much more the moral universe! History is replete with cultures, civilizations, and even modern nation states that have perpetrated atrocities, causing untold human suffering due to aberrant laws and ethics. Even in Greco-Roman antiquity, the source of natural law theory, human sacrifice was still practiced! Furthermore, Tertullian opined that gladiatorial combat was exactly that, a form of human sacrifice. And how do we explain the deaths of 58 million innocent babies through government-sanctioned abortions in the USA since 1973, a self-professed free and just society! Clearly, any variety of man-made law, whether so-called natural law (i.e. inherent rights) or positivist law (i.e. legislated by society) is subject to the fallibility of the fallen human state, that is, its bias toward sin.

Natural Law & the Doctrine of Revelation

Second, natural law theory does not comport with the biblical doctrine of revelation. The role of reason in relation to revelation is the nub of the problem. But to understand the former, one must first understand the latter. Revelation can be conveniently categorised as both general and special.

General revelation is the disclosure of God to humankind universally, through both creation and conscience.

The former (creation) Paul explains:

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.

Romans 1:19–20

And the latter (conscience) he also explains:

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even

though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them

Romans 2:14–15

Those who promote natural law as a Christian enterprise misconstrue God's general revelation through man's conscience. Man in the image of God does possess an inherent revelation of God's nature and righteousness; nonetheless, it is suppressed and skewed through sin (Rom 1:21-28; 1 Tim 4:2). It is therefore a deficient source for ethics and law.

For this reason – man's sinful state – God has provided special revelation to his more general disclosure in creation and conscience. Although in his pre-fall state man was still provided with God's verbal or special revelation so as to interpret the world properly, thinking the thoughts of God after him. The role of reason is thus to submit to revelation. And how much more should this be the case after the Fall!

This special revelation he has provided through Scripture.

This is shown in Psalm 19. First God is revealed through creation:

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

Psalms 19:1–6

And then through Scripture:

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever;
the rules of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold,
sweeter also than hone and drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

Who can discern his errors? Declare me innocent from hidden faults. Keep back your servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me! Then I shall be blameless and innocent of great transgression.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Psalms 19:7–14

As can be seen in the psalm, only God's special revelation in Scripture can save us from "hidden" and "presumptuous" sins. This is because it is definitive and prescriptive.

God's special revelation to man comes in verbal, rational, propositional form: as Scripture. It authoritatively proscribes certain behaviours and commands others. Because "*All Scripture* is God breathed" it transcends man-made law, and is therefore "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16).

Scripture is therefore the only sure source of law for mankind.

Natural Law & the Doctrine of End Things

Third, natural law theory does not comport with the biblical doctrine of end things. This is where we tread on your theological corns. Because God is the God of order, the part will never contradict the whole. God is one and, thus, has one mind and one purpose flowing throughout the whole of Scripture, both Old and New Testament. This gives us the principle of 'scripture interpreting scripture', and thus also the notion of 'systematic theology'.

With the whole of Scripture unarguably climaxing in Christ, my argument is that our Christology (doctrine of Christ) should inform our Eschatology (doctrine of end things). If Christ is the climax of history, fulfilling the burden of Messianic promise and prophecy, his first advent inevitably signals the *eschaton*: the end (Rev 1:17; 22:12). For it was in his coming as man, in real-time history, that Satan, sin, and death were definitively defeated. His agonising declaration on the cross – "It is finished!" – echoes across history the finality of his work. It is in this epoch of history – this time-space world – that the man Christ Jesus conquered sin and death, rising from the dead, ascending to the right hand of the majesty, from where he is now actively ruling the universe, prosecuting the eternal determinations of his Father, and from where he will only return when all his enemies have been made his footstool (Psa 110). Therefore any eschatological system that denies the ascended Christ his glory and victory in history must be brought into question.

How, you may ask, does this relate to natural law? Very simply, if our eschatology consigns history – and thus human culture and society – to the devil, in whatever measure, we will have no need of a divine ethic or law for society. For this reason many evangelical and even reformed scholars have resorted to a 'two kingdom' theory: the kingdom of God, primarily expressed in the church; and the kingdom of this world, expressed in society. Consequently, man-made law is sufficient for the latter, while God's law is exclusively for the former. How is this not a travesty of the Gospel and of God's purpose for his kingdom in history!

Natural Law & the Doctrine of God

Fourth, and finally, more significantly natural law theory does not comport with the biblical doctrine of God. Scripture reveals the creator-God as sovereign over the affairs of men—over history and the time-space world. His sovereignty is expressed and established through his word:

By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host.
He gathers the waters of the sea as a heap; he puts the deeps in storehouses.
Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him!
For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.

The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples.
The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.
Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage!

Psalms 33:6–12

All things are governed through his decrees. They are predestined in his eternal counsels so that even the death of Jesus at the hands of lawless men was predetermined:

this Jesus, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put him to death.

Acts 2:23

for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

Acts 4:27–28

In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will,

Ephesians 1:11

God governs the world, both physical and moral, in which man dwells, sovereignly and providentially. There is nothing outside of his jurisdiction.

Therefore, to posit two kingdoms and two kinds of law, one for the church and one for the world, is inconsistent with the revelation of the sovereign God; likewise, the rejection of the notion of a Christian nation or society. It is dualistic, implying that the Gospel is exclusively dealing with spiritual things, not with the world of matter, of history and culture, of ethics and society.

As already stated, God's sovereignty is established through his word. Therefore, the Scriptures contain a sufficient revelation of God's wisdom and ways for his will to be done on earth among men. In them we have God's laws – that is, in Old and New Testament – not only for Christians but also for civil society (1 Tim 1:8-11; Deut 4:1-8; Mtt 28:18-20; Isa 2:1-5).

Conclusion

And so, in conclusion, having weighed natural law theory against the biblical doctrines of man, revelation, the end, and most importantly, the doctrine of God, we therefore reject any suggestion that it – or any man-made law – provides an adequate foundation for the Christian or a godly society.

Long-term cultural transformation can only occur if we return to the God of both Old and New Testament, and thus to his law-word, and its authority over man's total existence. He's either Lord of all or not at all.

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