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# natural law



# *Ordained Servant Online*

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### *From the Editor*

While it is always important in our ecclesiastical debates to be concerned about the unity and peace of the church as well as its doctrinal and ethical purity, debates are an important aspect of the church militant's life and witness here on earth. Recent topics of intense discussion, such as justification, union with Christ, the nature of the covenants, and natural law and the two kingdoms, have forced us to open our Bibles, confessional standards, and theologies as we seek understanding and consensus within our confessional boundaries. Debate also forces us to consult the ancient church fathers and the Reformers. But most illuminating to me in recent years has been our renewed interest in post-Reformation theologians. The continuity between the magisterial Reformers and these post-Reformation theologians has, until recently, been vastly underestimated. This, in turn, has led to the rediscovery of a number of important doctrines, especially natural law, which is the subject of this issue of *Ordained Servant Online*.

David VanDrunen ably sets forth a summary of the positive construction of this doctrine in light of its place in historical theology and biblical exegesis in his article "Natural Law in Reformed Theology: Historical Reflections and Biblical Suggestions." David Noe provides a nice example of how the closely related doctrine of the two kingdoms should affect our use of the modifier "Christian," in his article, "Is There Such a Thing as Christian Education?"

In keeping with our theme of exploring God's work in the natural order, Steve Migotsky reviews Vern Poythress's *Redeeming Science*.

Don't miss Christina Rossetti's resurrection poem.

Finally, be sure to avail yourself of the various formats in which *OSO* is now available. PDF, ePub, and Mobi formats allow a wider distribution of this material to church officers and members.

Blessings in the Lamb,  
Gregory Edward Reynolds



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*Ordained Servant* exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high quality editorials, articles, and book reviews we endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

# Servant Truth

## Natural Law in Reformed Theology: Historical Reflections and Biblical Suggestions

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David VanDrunen

I am grateful for the invitation to give this lecture,<sup>1</sup> both for the opportunity to serve the presbytery and to learn from you as I continue my own work on the subject of natural law. I know that this can be a controversial topic. Before I begin I should offer a brief definition of natural law: it is a law given by God, defining human beings' basic moral obligations and the consequences of obedience and disobedience, revealed objectively in the natural world and known subjectively by rational human beings who are constantly confronted by the natural world, though sinfully prone to twist its meaning.

In the first section I offer historical reflections. I conclude that natural law simply *is* a part of the historic Reformed system of doctrine and intimately woven into the Westminster Standards. Thus, I believe the question before us as Reformed Christians is not *whether* we have a theology of natural law, but *what kind*. In the second section, therefore, I present an outline of how a good Reformed biblical theology of natural law might be constructively developed.

### Historical Reflections

A number of concerns make many contemporary Reformed Christians anxious or even agitated when they hear a fellow Reformed believer saying a positive word about natural law. The concerns often run along the following lines: the idea of natural law entails too high a view of the powers of human reason (and hence too weak a view of human sin); it detracts from the supreme authority of Scripture (and hence compromises the doctrine of *sola scriptura*); and it promotes a vision of ethics based on human autonomy (and hence without the immediate need to take God into account).

These concerns about natural law are valid. They are valid *if* we understand natural law in the way proponents of the Enlightenment increasingly understood it. After a long period of religious wars and social unrest following the Reformation, many European intellectuals wished to find a way to unite people across traditional confessional divides, through the common and universal powers of human reason, unencumbered by detailed theological convictions. They adapted the idea of natural law to serve this end. Natural law became a tool for constructing a universal human ethic, unhooked from the deep theological doctrines that Christians had traditionally used to talk about natural law. This Enlightenment perspective did indeed have too great a confidence in reason, have too low a view of Scripture, and promote an autonomous human ethic.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is a shortened and edited version of a lecture given at the pre-presbytery theology conference of the Presbytery of the Midwest (OPC), in Grayslake, IL, March 2011.

The concerns that many contemporary Reformed Christians have about natural law, however, are *not* valid with respect to historic Reformed views of this subject. In many respects they are not even valid with respect to medieval views of it. It is fascinating, furthermore, that many contemporary natural law theorists—from various points on the Christian theological spectrum—are saying that we need to get away from these Enlightenment ideas about natural law and recover older approaches to the subject that reconnect it to biblical teaching and rich theological doctrines. In light of this, I now reflect briefly on natural law from the Middle Ages through the Reformation era, concluding with the place of natural law in the Westminster Standards.

In the Middle Ages, theologians, philosophers, and jurists all wrote about and utilized natural law. Though they had some internal disputes about certain aspects of natural law, there was widespread consensus on many important points. They agreed that the natural law exists. They believed that God himself had created the natural order and the human conscience that perceives it and responds to it, and thus they believed that the natural law placed people under obligation to God. These medieval thinkers also taught that sin has damaged the human person's ability to understand and to follow the natural law. On the practical side, they commonly spoke about natural law as foundational for civil law (though in a flexible way, requiring prudential application to particular circumstances). Finally, they believed that natural law and biblical moral teaching should be mutually illuminating, neither of them to be explored completely independently of the other. I do not mean to suggest that medieval natural law was perfect. It was not. But medieval thinkers did think about natural law in biblical and theological terms.

As far as I can tell, the Reformers looked at natural law as a part of catholic Christianity that stood in no great need of reform. The Reformers obviously thought that many aspects of Christian doctrine needed serious reform—issues such as justification, the sacraments, and the relationship of biblical and ecclesiastical authority among the most familiar to us. But they did not view many other aspects of their doctrinal inheritance in this way—the doctrine of the Trinity and the two natures of Christ, for example. Natural law, it seems, fell into the latter category.

This is not to deny, however, that there were some shifts in perspective on natural law among the Reformers and their heirs, even if they did not take up natural law as a point of focus for their reforms. Compared to their medieval forbears they had an enhanced sense of the dreadful effects of sin and its noetic effects, and hence also an enhanced sense of the necessity of Scripture to clarify and correct their interpretation of what the natural law reveals. The Reformers also developed an understanding of the conscience in some new directions, which in turn shaped certain aspects of their doctrine of natural law. In connection with the doctrine of the two kingdoms, furthermore, we find Reformers making clearer distinctions between the role of natural law with respect to “earthly things” and its role with respect to “heavenly things” (to borrow John Calvin's language), such that natural law could play a rather positive function for the former while for the latter serving only the negative function of convicting people of their sins and driving them to a Savior. In other words, God gave natural law a positive role in helping to promote a measure of social order and cultural achievement in this world, but it could not constructively advance a person one step toward a right relationship with God or eternal life.

I believe there is more work to do in developing a Reformed theology of natural law that is biblically penetrating and consistent with our broader doctrinal commitments. But, before I turn to that subject, it is worth reflecting on how natural law became thoroughly integrated into the Reformed system of doctrine and confessional standards.

As far as I can tell, older Reformed theologians never made much effort to build a distinctively Reformed theology of natural law, but they all affirmed the existence of natural law, and they incorporated it into their theology. The Westminster Standards illustrate this. I have counted at least thirteen direct references to natural law in the standards (which uses various terms, such as “light of nature,” the “law of God written in their hearts,” and “law of nature”), and there are also indirect references. But perhaps more significant than the sheer number of references is the range of Reformed doctrines that the standards connect to natural law. This means that one cannot extract natural law from the system of doctrine taught in the standards without fundamentally damaging the system itself. Natural law is integral to the historic Reformed system of doctrine.

What doctrines do the standards associate with natural law in one way or another? One is the existence of God: “The very light of nature in man . . . declare[s] plainly that there is a God” (Westminster Larger Catechism 2). (This refers to natural revelation more broadly, and not simply to natural law.) Another is the nature of human beings as created under the covenant of works. Westminster Confession of Faith 4.2 and WLC 17 describe the first humans as “having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfil it.” The standards also appeal to natural law to describe the most basic moral commitment that continues to bind all people after the fall into sin: “The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and doth good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might” (WCF 21.1). The Sabbath is another important moral issue the standards associate with natural law: “It is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God” (WCF 21.7). Of course, the standards also hold that all people rebel against this natural moral revelation. This means that there is no salvation for anyone apart from the word of Scripture, be they “never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature” (WCF 10.4; WLC 60). WLC 151 also speaks of the “light of nature” when explaining the heinousness of sin. And natural law ensures the accountability of all people before God at the final judgment: “The light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable” (WCF 1.1).

Natural law, furthermore, plays positive roles for believers and the church, according to the Westminster Standards. It helps us to understand the bounds of our Christian liberty, for example, for Christian liberty does not permit us to publish opinions or maintain practices that are “contrary to the light of nature” (WCF 20.4). Natural law is also necessary for the proper ordering of worship and ecclesiastical government. In the very section explaining the sufficiency of Scripture, the WCF states: “There are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature” (1.6). WCF 1.6 provides a helpful reminder: in classic Reformed theology, the doctrine of *sola scriptura* means that we do not need other forms of *special* revelation, not that we do not

need natural revelation. Scripture itself presumes the existence, and continuing importance, of natural revelation.

In light of all this, I believe that we who are confessional Presbyterians do not have an option about whether to affirm a robust doctrine of natural law as part of our system of doctrine. Our challenge is to develop a theology of natural law from Scripture that best illuminates and further refines this confessional material.

### **Biblical Suggestions**

This second section describes how I think a biblical theology of natural law might be constructively developed, in ways consistent with and supportive of the Reformed system of doctrine. First I reflect on a covenantal theology of nature and then turn to the importance of natural law with respect to unbelievers and believers.

First, I suggest that a Reformed theology of natural law should be grounded in a theology of nature, which in turn should be grounded in our covenant theology. When thinking about a theology of nature, it makes sense first to consider Genesis 1 and the original covenant of works. Genesis 1 makes immediately clear that God's creating activity instills the entire natural world with order and purpose. His creation is objectively meaningful. Another thing Genesis 1 explicitly teaches is that God made human beings in his image, and this image entailed knowledge, righteousness, and holiness (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10). Human beings were thus subjectively capable of comprehending and acting upon the truth communicated in nature. To say that the natural order is objectively meaningful and that human beings are subjectively capable of apprehending its meaning may seem like obvious assertions to many Christians, but they are crucial foundation to a theology of natural law, and they emerge already from Genesis 1. We also observe in Genesis 1 that God made man in his image for the purpose of exercising dominion in the world. God had exercised supreme dominion in creating the world, and man, according to his likeness, was to rule the world under him. If man was to rule the world in God's likeness, he had to rule it not aimlessly but toward a goal, for God himself worked, then passed through his own judgment (Gen 1:31), and finally rested. As taught in our doctrine of the covenant of works, God made man to work, then to pass through his judgment, and finally to join him in his eschatological rest. Genesis 1, I believe, does not allow us to separate our doctrine of the image of God from the covenant of works, as if the latter were simply added on at some point after man's creation. God made human beings *by nature* to work in this world and then to attain eschatological life. Thus the original order of nature communicated not only man's basic moral obligations toward God but also the fact that God would judge him for his response and reward or punish him accordingly.

In light of the fall, however, we cannot simply view natural law now through the lens of the original creation. Accordingly, I suggest that it is helpful to view natural law in the present world through the lens of the covenant with Noah in Genesis 8:20–9:17, for this is the means by which God now preserves and governs both the cosmic and social realms. This covenant makes clear that God still orders the cosmos and makes it objectively meaningful, though its purposes have been obscured, and that he still deals with all human beings as his image-bearers, though they are fallen. God gives human beings responsibilities adapted for a fallen world, but these responsibilities resemble those under the original creation order. We are to be fruitful and multiply, to rule the animals responsibly, and to pursue justice (Gen 9:1–7). God did not impose these obligations

arbitrarily; they correspond to the nature with which he created us. The very commission to do justice is grounded in human nature: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, *for God made man in his own image*” (9:6).

God’s original work of creation and his providential governance of the fallen world under the Noahic covenant, therefore, provide crucial foundation for developing a theology of natural law. But how does the rest of Scripture speak about natural law and its purposes? In what follows, I identify aspects of biblical teaching that show the importance of natural law with respect to unbelievers and then with respect to believers.

There are at least three important functions of natural law with respect to unbelievers. First, natural law is a tool of common grace for the preservation of human society. This corresponds to what is often termed the *second use* of the law. The story of Abraham and Abimelech in Genesis 20 provides a good illustration. Sojourning in Gerar, Abraham deceived king Abimelech by calling Sarah his sister, and Abimelech promptly took her into his home. Informed of the real situation by God in a dream, Abimelech confronted Abraham the next morning. Though they came from different places, cultures, and religions, Abimelech accused him: “You have done to me things that ought not to be done” (20:9). This pagan recognized a universal standard of morality, cutting across cultural and ethnic divides, that one person should be able to expect any other person to acknowledge. Abraham’s response—“I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife” (20:11)—displays that he had misjudged Gerar. There was indeed a certain (non-redemptive) fear of God in this place that restrained the outbreak of sin. The natural law is an instrument of common grace.

Second, natural law is a means for bringing all people under God’s universal judgment. Romans 1 provides a clear example. In 1:18–21 Paul teaches that all people are without excuse before God and stand under his wrath because of what can be known about him “in the things that have been made.” Through creation itself they *know* God, though they constantly distort this knowledge. Among their sins, they give up “natural relations for those that are contrary to nature” (1:26). Paul also states that through this natural revelation they “know God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die” (1:32). The picture is not absolutely negative, for Paul later adds that Gentiles also “by nature do what the law requires” (2:14). But this internal knowledge of God’s law involves judgments of the conscience that serve as a foretaste of the final judgment: “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, on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus” (2:15–16).

Third, natural law is important for unbelievers because it lays necessary foundation for proclaiming the gospel. This corresponds to the so-called *first use* of the law. The previously quoted verses from Romans 1–2, of course, are part of Paul’s own foundational teaching in preparation for his explanation of justification and other saving benefits, beginning in Romans 3:21. In short, without the law there is no gospel. Without conviction of sin there can be no faith and repentance. Calling attention to the testimony of natural law, therefore, promotes the effective preaching of salvation in Christ.

Finally, I turn to the importance of natural law for believers. Here again I mention three basic considerations. First, natural law rebukes us when we stray. The function of natural law described in Romans 2:14–15 does not entirely cease in people who come to



faith, for it continues to prick our consciences concerning sin. The Old Testament prophets frequently appealed to Israel's knowledge of the natural world and the way it works in order to help the people understand the utter ridiculousness of their rebellion against God (e.g., Isa. 1:2–3; Jer. 8:7). Understandably, there are fewer examples of this in the New Testament, but consider Paul's statement: "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife" (1 Cor. 5:1). His comment only makes sense if pagans are aware of a universal moral truth. Paul awakens believers' consciences by shaming them through the natural law.

Second, natural law shows believers how we are to live well in a dangerous world. Scripture makes clear that the moral life is not just about memorizing rules, but also about observing the world, learning how things work, and drawing appropriate moral conclusions. The *wisdom* commended in Proverbs is inconceivable without natural law. The structure of the universe is suffused with God's wisdom, by which he made it (Prov. 8:22–31), and by perceiving and following this wisdom human beings find success and blessing in the world (8:15–21, 32–36). Observation of the world should lead believers to conclusions about how it regularly operates, and this in turn should compel certain moral conclusions. For example, observing the ant (6:6–8) and the sluggard's vineyard (24:30–34) warn against laziness.

Third, natural law explains and reinforces for us, as New Testament saints, why we continue to honor and participate in the natural institutions of this world (such as family and state), though we are already citizens of a heavenly kingdom that does not have such institutions. Christ did not *establish* any institution except the church, and he did not *create* any brand new obligations toward the family or state. With regard to such institutions the New Testament echoes and reinforces obligations that are already there under the natural law (though we are now to pursue them "in Christ"). Commands about marital fidelity, raising children, pursuing justice, and honoring magistrates are not arbitrary, but are appropriate for the kind of people God made us by nature. Romans 13:1–7, for instance, reflects the natural order preserved under the Noahic covenant, in which God ordained the use of the sword by his image-bearers to enforce justice against evildoers (Gen 9:6). And both Jesus and Paul appealed to the creation order to explain their exhortations about marriage and sexual morality (Matt. 19:3–9; Mark 10:2–12; 1 Cor. 11:2–16). It is true—and I believe very important to remember—that Christians are also called to witness by their conduct that they ultimately belong to the new creation, where the natural order in the form we now know it will no longer exist. Our non-retributive, reconciliation-seeking church discipline, which looks so different from the way the state is to deal with wrongdoing, is a good example. But as long as we live in this present age, the reality of the natural law explains our continuing obligation to honor natural institutions.

## Conclusion

Having offered these historical reflections and biblical suggestions, I conclude with three basic reasons why we should recover a Reformed theology of natural law. We should do so, first, in order to be faithful to our Presbyterian confessional tradition (as well as to show that we are true heirs of catholic Christianity). We should recover a Reformed theology of natural law, secondly, in order to be better able to teach the whole

counsel of God from the Scriptures. Finally, this endeavor will help us to understand better the ways by which God upholds human society through his common grace and thus to understand better how to make our way as sojourners in this world and to proclaim the gospel faithfully within it.

**David VanDrunen**, *a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, is the Robert B. Strimple Professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics at Westminster Seminary California.*

# Is There Such a Thing as Christian Education?

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David C. Noe

Nouns are important. Along with verbs, they are the sturdy workhorses of any language. Writers both skillful and clumsy call upon them routinely to pull heavy cartloads of meaning through the streets of prose and poetry alike. The many things we want to say cannot be said without nouns. In their concrete and abstract forms nouns undergird and adorn all manner of important communication. There is a sense in which the noun in any given expression is the essential element while the accompanying adjective provides us with a shade or modification of meaning. This is why in Latin, and in the Romance languages which call her mother, the noun typically precedes the adjective: *Geneva pulchrior urbibus aliis est* we might say, or “Geneva is more beautiful than other cities.” Geneva comes first, then that she is quite beautiful. English convention is of course the opposite, as we seem to want to know *what kind* a thing is before knowing *what* the thing is itself.

Adjectives, which give us the *what kind*, likewise have a part to play in the drama called speech. Adjectives can be revealing, concealing, pointed, dull, archaic, newly-minted, and everywhere in between. They add color and flavor to the staid and reliable world of nouns. It is on one particular adjective, namely “Christian,” that I want to focus in this brief essay.

In the book of Acts, Luke records for us that it was at Antioch that disciples of Christ Jesus were first called Christian (Acts 11:26). Since what follows below may seem obstinate or narrow to those accustomed to applying the adjective “Christian” to all manner of nouns (counseling, publishing, radio, hip-hop, etc.), I want to state for the record that it is clear the adjective Christian can be used properly. While the only biblical example that we have, the one just cited, refers exclusively to those persons in whom Christ dwells by his Spirit, arguably we can extend the adjective to apply to those things closely and uniquely connected to Christ. For example, “Christian worship” is a designation that does not seem to admit of any real ambiguity. It helps us distinguish the worship of Christ from that of Allah, for example. There are certainly important differences in Christian worship, between, for example those who follow the regulative as opposed to the normative principle. But clearly the phrase has reference only to the worship of Christ’s person performed by his followers. Likewise, the adjective Christian seems to me to apply well to the noun “religion,” as that also names one and one thing only, the many differences notwithstanding.

When one attempts, however, to apply the adjective Christian to other sorts of nouns, an immediate difficulty arises. Since non-Christians also engage in nearly every activity in which Christians properly engage,<sup>1</sup> from cooking and eating, to riding their bicycles, to writing poetry, it becomes difficult or even impossible to identify precisely what about how that activity is performed or what product it results in makes it “Christian.” If, for

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<sup>1</sup> I use the adverb “properly” here in an advised fashion, inasmuch as there are obviously sinful activities, adultery, lying, stealing, that I do not think are in danger of being labeled “Christian” even by those most eager to employ the modifier (although it has been applied even to such unlikely and inappropriate candidates as “hedonism”).

example, a world-class cyclist wins the Tour de France one summer, and then by God's grace is transferred during the off-season from the kingdom of darkness to that of Christ Jesus, presumably this new believer will want in the next season to ride for his Lord.

How precisely is he to do this? He is now both a Christian and a cyclist no doubt, but is there such a thing as "Christian cycling"? One may wish to answer that "Christian cycling" does in fact exist, because the one who once cycled for money or fame, which are selfish motives if pursued exclusive of God's glory, now cycles for the glory of God. Such an idea is coherent and even helpful, but notice that we have now expressed by attaching the adjective "Christian" something about the person, but nothing specific about the actual activity.

I can watch on my television as three hundred cyclists climb the Alps and then race through the streets of Paris toward the finish line, not having any idea whatsoever which one is engaged in Christian cycling and which is practicing Jewish cycling perhaps or Hindu cycling. In other words, the activity itself, though practiced by a Christian, has really not changed at all in and of itself. If our Christian cyclist were in fact to alter his activity in the slightest way from what caused him to win the event in the previous year at a time when he was not reconciled to God, he may very well lose the race. In that instance, we might be tempted to say he was cycling to God's glory less than before inasmuch as his pursuit of excellence was now diminished.

But let us say that his skill is not diminished and he succeeds in winning this brutally competitive contest. He then boldly proclaims to the cameras that mob him in the winner's circle that he gives all glory to God for his victory. We then know that he is both a Christian and a cyclist because he has told us something about his personal commitments and motivations, his desire to glorify the God who made and saved him. But I do not think we are in any way justified in calling what he does "Christian cycling." It is not distinguishable except for motive and disposition from the second place winner who worships Allah or perhaps no god at all. And unless he tells us, we do not know his motive any way. I am not at all suggesting that motives and intentions are unimportant. In fact, as Calvin says in *Institutes* Book III, they are the primary value of good works. But we are wrong, I suggest, to expect that difference in motivation will yield other kinds of observable differences.

One might be inclined to agree with the analysis so far but dissent when we start to apply the same logic to something other than athletic activity. Can there, for example, be a Christian practice of philosophy or of art, by which we want to indicate something unique with respect to content and practice rather than merely about their practitioners?<sup>2</sup> One might want to make a claim like this on the belief that certain kinds of activities, those in which the mind rather than the body seem to predominate as regards success, are more revelatory of the image of God implanted within us. In point of fact, I am not sure that this would reflect anything more than ignorance of the intellectual elements involved in winning the Tour de France (strategizing, years of nutritional manipulation, etc.) It may also be a simple prejudice for abstraction over sweaty exertion. Whatever the case, let us grant for the sake of argument that music and philosophy are higher in some sense than athletics.

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<sup>2</sup> I choose these nouns advisedly as well, since they may be considered subsets of a typical program of so-called Christian education.

If by “Christian philosophy” one means philosophizing (the production and evaluation of rational arguments that deal with such things as ethics and metaphysics, for example) that deals with explicitly Christian topics,<sup>3</sup> then at first glance the adjective has some salience. But deeper reflection, I argue, proves that this designation is also problematic. Presumably a very bright non-Christian reasoning consistently, diligently and with complete access to the basic data of special revelation, can more often reach sound and valid conclusions than the most devout yet dim-witted believer on the topic of our Lord’s incarnation.

If that is true, what would it be about the believer’s philosophizing that makes it uniquely Christian? If we cannot tell based on the product of his or her work whether our philosopher was practicing “Christian philosophy” even on topics that deal explicitly with matters of faith, does the noun “philosophy” receive any meaningful modification when we add “Christian” to it? Could one really be said to practice Christian philosophy in that instance? Are we not rather just back at the same point with philosophy done well (producing both sound and valid arguments that tell us something meaningful about the world), but that it is Christian when done by Christians with specific goals and dispositions motivating them and non-Christian otherwise?

The same seems to apply to the practice of art. Much of the really gorgeous art of the Renaissance and other eras deals with explicitly Christian topics. Caravaggio’s painting of David holding the severed head of Goliath, for example, is executed on a theme that comes directly from special revelation in 1 Samuel. Is this Christian art? It might make sense to call it such if we mean art that deals with Christian themes. But could we say that Caravaggio or any other painter was practicing Christian art simply because he or she painted such themes? Other artists, who tell us explicitly that their motive is to glorify God, are sometimes by common consent less skilled at what they do and do not always depict scenes from special revelation in their paintings.<sup>4</sup>

When Pope Paul V threatened Caravaggio with excommunication and sentenced him to death, did he cease to be a practitioner of Christian art during that time, since he was officially outside the communion of the church? When the same Pope later pardoned him, did his status as a Christian artist return? In addition, few would doubt that some of the beautiful paintings on religious themes were wrought by those not reconciled to God through Christ. Were they practicing Christian art, though not themselves Christian? In other words, if the cultural product is not materially distinguishable when done by a Christian or non-Christian, does it make sense to call what the Christian practices “Christian art”? And are not the skills involved in painting beautifully the same whether one is depicting Madonna and Child or Bacchus and Ariadne? So it seems that neither the skills constituting the process nor the final product are distinguishable when practiced by Christians or non-Christians irrespective of theme.

As a first conclusion, then, we find that the adjective “Christian” is not meaningful with respect to the cultural artifact itself nor the process that an individual uses to produce it. Both the skills involved and the final product can always be the same for believers and non-believers alike (I can think of no counter-examples that are not actually

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<sup>3</sup> In other words, if “Christian philosophy” simply means philosophizing about the hypostatic union of Christ’s two natures, the extent of the atonement, and like topics, then the designation seems at first to have coherence.

<sup>4</sup> The example I have in mind is Thomas Kincaid.



violations of God's law). In addition, we often do not have access to the disposition and intention of the cyclist, philosopher, or painter. Unless they tell us that they ride, reason, and paint for God's glory, we would seem to be on very shaky ground in labeling anything about the activity "Christian" in any sense.

God knows those who are his own and their motives also, and at the last day we may learn that all sorts of activities were indeed Christian because we see, *ex post facto*, that they were done for his glory. But that seems to me to have little value in the present life, since we are not privy to such knowledge, and, as I have said, even when we are, when the agents tell us *why* they do things, it does not change in any way *what* they do or *how* they do it. In addition, it would also seem impossible to teach others how to be a Christian pianist or Christian volleyball player beyond giving exhortations with respect to motive. And I imagine that we would offer the same exhortations to the non-believer: practice scales and arpeggios, or bump, set, and spike, for God's glory and not your own.

If what I have argued so far is true, then it would seem to apply as well to that last noun-stronghold where the adjective "Christian" shelters and where many thinking Christians wish to keep it protected. I mean education. I teach Classics for the glory of God. I do this because he has saved me from my sins, and reconciled me to himself through the vicarious atonement of his Son freely given for me. This makes what I do Christian, but it seems that this is only because I seek, *Dei gratia*, to do it for his glory.<sup>5</sup>

I use in this instruction a vast array of books, tools, terms, and skills, the overwhelming majority of which were produced by men and women whose motivations are likely different than mine. Moreover, while their motivations sometimes differ from mine in ways that are un-Christian,<sup>6</sup> I as a Christian am utterly at a loss to find a better, or sometimes even different way to do the things they did despite my having a motivation that is sanctified. In fact, efforts to find a uniquely Christian way to teach Classics, for example, seem both vain and futile, as well as ungrateful in that they risk denying the common grace God has given the wicked, the rain he has sent on us both, and by which he has apparently intended to bless me also.

Process aside, what about results? If I fail in using my sometimes superior (because righteous) motivation to produce superior results, either because I do not have gifts equivalent to those of non-believers or because I am sinfully lazy in employing what gifts I have, should I be allowed to say I am providing students with a "Christian education"? My motive, at least at times, is Christian (to glorify my Savior), but that says something about me, not about the education itself.

If I succeed with my sanctified motivation and surpass the efforts of a non-believer such that my students understand Plato's Greek, for example, more accurately and profoundly than if a non-Christian had taught them, this does not seem to me to constitute

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<sup>5</sup> It seems to me quite important that WCF 16.7, in its explanation of how the works of a believer differ from those of the unregenerate, mentions only the motives of the one who performs them rather than the method, and seems to say that a "right manner" means in conformity to the Word. It also suggests the outward indiscriminability of such works.

<sup>6</sup> Apart from Christ, they may be motivated by vainglory, love of money, etc. But to my shame, I often do my work, *simul iustus et peccator*, from the same motivations (cf. WCF 16.5). And non-believers seem often to act from altruistic motives, to the extent that anyone truly understands their own motives. This is another very telling criticism even of the "motivation" explanation for labeling something "Christian." Note that it does not militate against something actually being found by Christ to be a good work, but rather against our accustomed carelessness in so labeling it.

Christian education. The rejoinder that a Christian will have taught them to see Christ speaking in Plato<sup>7</sup> will not do either, since that can also be accomplished by a non-Christian and presumably better by one more gifted and studied than their Christian counterpart. This means the fact that I am a Christian would make no observable difference in either process or result when it comes to educating students in Plato. If so, why give the adjective “Christian” to education? Remember that discussing motivations is mostly saying something about persons, not about the task itself in either process or result.

In conclusion, it seems to me that, as with cycling, philosophy, and music, the most we can say about “Christian education” is that it is education delivered or provided by Christians. This, of course, is not an unimportant claim. But when we say that, however, we are once again talking about dispositions and motives and saying nothing distinguishable either about the process or the result of that process. In short, it seems there may be no such thing as Christian education after all, at least not in the sense in which it seems often used, and that grand adjective which indicates a special closeness with the divine Son of God ought, perhaps, to be confined within a much closer compass: to persons whom Christ has saved, the worship such persons offer, and the study and promulgation of the divine Word on which that worship is based. If by “Christian education” this is what is meant, the term seems quite apt.<sup>8</sup>

*David C. Noe, a ruling elder at Redeemer OPC in Ada, Michigan, is Assistant Professor of Classics at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan.*

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<sup>7</sup> I mean this in a light of nature way (WCF 1.1), and quite despite Plato’s own intentions or consciousness of the fact.

<sup>8</sup> I believe that this is the way in which WCF 1.6 uses the phrase “Christian prudence,” i.e., in a context explicitly tied to questions of ordering Christian worship according to the Word. And even here the light of nature contributes.

# ServantReading

## Faith and Reason Review Article

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by Stephen A. Migotsky

*Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach*, by Vern S. Poythress. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006, 381 pages, \$20.00.

The relationship between science and Christianity is often oversimplified by Christians with the result that special revelation (Bible) and natural revelation (science) are deemed incompatible, or one undervalued. Meditating on scripture and meditating on creation are both means of grace from the two important revelations from God—special and general revelation. The Christian’s life is strengthened by both. Specifically, Christian books about science can help us appreciate the glory of God, the cultural mandate (Gen. 1:28), and the brokenness of this world—“vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (Eccl. 1:2). On the other hand, misleading books on science can also do much damage to the Christian.

### Strengths of the Book

Poythress (Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Westminster Theological Seminary) is concerned that people have misunderstood science and biblical theology. He argues that most believers are influenced by the false idea that being a believer is somehow incompatible with being a scientist. This causes believers to conclude that scientific work is not really biblical. In Adam’s role as ruler over the world, Poythress appropriately calls Adam the first scientist. Adam was to accomplish the cultural mandate by scientific work. Useful examples of wrong thinking about creation are given with Poythress’s correctives. God is described as the source of the goodness of creation and the regularity of creation (Gen. 8:22). Excellent biblical support is given for these concerns.

All human knowledge and reasoning are suspect.

Spectacular as modern science may be, it is still subject to limitations because humans do the work. We are finite and fallible, and after the fall we are sinful. The Christian view of the world provides clear space for science, but also indicates some limits. . . . Scientists’ constructions of scientific laws are not the *real* laws, but an approximation or the best guess about the laws. [*italics his*] (160)

When Poythress discusses the apparent discrepancies between special and general revelation, he is very helpful. God's twin revelations are not and cannot be in conflict.

The key to an insightful resolution of discrepancies may crop up anywhere. It could be in the details of evidence. It could lie in a subtle or radical revision of some unexamined assumption. It could lie in some new theory superseding the old. It could lie in a worldview that distorts one's understanding. It could lie in the joint effects of more than one area. (43)

In the case of apparent discrepancies between the Bible and science, we must therefore be ready to reexamine both our thinking about the Bible and our thinking about science. We must not assume too quickly that the error lies in one particular direction. In the modern world, we find people who are always ready to assume that science is right and the Bible is wrong. Or, contrariwise, others assume that the Bible is always right and modern science is always wrong. (43)

But the Bible *is* always right, and should be trusted on that account. Likewise, God's word concerning providence is always right and trustworthy. But modern science, as a *human* interpretation of God's providence, may make mistakes. Our *interpretation* of providence may need revision. And our *interpretation* of the Bible may need revision. [italics his] (43)

Galileo's opponents claimed that he must be wrong about the movement of the sun and the earth, because, they alleged the Bible clearly taught the earth was immovable. (44)

Poythress identifies special problems with interpreting providence and general revelation. "Modern science, as typically practiced, is idolatry" (56). Poythress describes that idolatry in clear terms related to the human desire for independence from God and the desire to be powerful.

Poythress is a deep thinker in biblical theology, mathematics, and science. He carefully and biblically takes on the controversial subjects of creation, length of days of creation, the age of the earth, and evolution, as well as topics in physics, chemistry, and mathematics. This is deep waters for most readers, but Poythress is careful to help the non-scientist and non-mathematician. The book could be subtitled "A Christian Philosophy of Science," since much of what is discussed is what was called natural philosophy in the Middle Ages and philosophy of science today. For example, one chapter is "Debates About What Is Real." Any reader willing to put on his "thinking cap" will benefit from reading and re-reading several of these chapters. They are outstanding.

### **General Weaknesses of the Book**

The Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9) indicates the idolatrous nature of fallen humanity's creative work, including modern science. The Babelites wanted fame and had developed a technology and architecture that was impressive (Gen. 11:6). God frustrated

the Babelites in order to restrain their “science.” God deliberately frustrated the “scientists,” “engineers,” and builders of Babel. Why did God do this? Does God continue to do so in similar or other ways? Poythress doesn’t ask these questions. Unfortunately, Poythress doesn’t discuss Babel, and doesn’t see God still deliberately frustrating human understanding and achievement.

There is a difference between Adam’s prelapsarian world and today’s world. God cursed the earth and creation is now “futile” (Gen. 3:17, Eccl. 1:2, Rom. 8:20–22). Paul describes creation as being subject to ματαιότης (*mataiotēs*) *futility, purposelessness, transitoriness*<sup>1</sup> (Rom. 8:20–22). In Ecclesiastes, the scientific study of fallen creation is described as an impossible job. “Scientists” try to find the solution to puzzling observations of God’s creation and plan, but they will not succeed because God has made creation crooked and things are missing (Eccl. 1:14–15). All things that happen in this fallen world are really unpredictable and uncontrollable (“shepherding the wind” Eccl. 1:14).

Poythress does not discuss God’s curse on creation as making today’s science ultimately “futile, or vain.” Because of man’s idolatrous rebellion, God has not only frustrated the Babelites, but any scientific attempt toward perfect knowledge and control. Additionally, the redemption of Christ has not changed the brokenness of creation. Poythress writes: “Science is intended to be a task pursued and carried out in a spirit of praise. In science, we think God’s thoughts after him, and praise rises in our hearts as we see more of his wisdom” (339). Pre-fall Adam’s science would have seen God’s “very good” purposes and thoughts in the original “very good” creation. Praise would have attended Adam’s science; it *was* very good. Praise can still attend a believer’s scientific study of creation, but the world now is very, very corrupt and broken. God’s creation today is not the world that God declared was “very good” (Gen. 1:31), nor is man’s perception of it. Ecclesiastes 7:29 describes mankind’s sinful interpretation of God’s world: “God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.” It seems appropriate to temper Poythress’s conclusions about science, to include God’s curse on creation. The scientist in heaven will not see a broken, futile, dying world, but a world in its consummated, glorious, and perfect state. *That* world will perfectly reflect God’s glory. In this one we only see “dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12). We wait for a new science of the new heavens and new earth. We wait for a completed redemption.

Meantime, Poythress is correct: in God’s creation we can see something of the glory of God, but it is not the glory as God created it, or of the consummation.

## **Apologetic Weaknesses of the Book**

Poythress’s solid Van Tilian apologetics is evident in this book. However, there is a distinction between the belief required in scientific inquiry (a common grace) and saving faith (a redeeming grace). A casual reader might think non-Christian faith and saving faith were on a continuum. Atheist and agnostic scientists believe in God (13). The following quotes illustrate what is meant by a non-Christian’s faith.

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<sup>1</sup> W. Arndt, Danker, & W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed.) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 621.



He [Christ] gives blessings even to those who are still in rebellion against him. Because of our rebellion, we do not deserve to retain functioning minds.... If we nevertheless get benefits when we deserve the opposite, we are receiving a redemptive blessing. It does not mean that we ourselves as individuals have received personal salvation from Christ through faith. But if we are non-Christians, *we have a kind of shadow of this faith in the confidence* that we can receive and use what we do not deserve—although our confidence is distorted by ingratitude and pride. [italics mine] (174)

For physics and chemistry, Poythress sees a trinitarian nature in Newton's Laws of Motion. Poythress finds the Trinity in the Third Law of Motion—"To every action there is always opposed an equal and opposite reaction" (295).

Harmonious knowledge exists within the Trinity in three "perspectives." This unity in diversity reflects itself in human experience, in that we can take a diversity of perspectives and imagine what things look like from someone else's point of view. This capacity for perspectives gets used in the understanding of Newton's Third Law. (296)

Poythress goes on to describe how the proportionality of mathematics relates to the mathematical proportions of both the tabernacle and God himself.

And this idea of proportionality, as we have seen, reflects the proportions in the tabernacle, and these reflect the imaging process that has its origin in God himself. God has left a witness to himself inside the mathematics that Newton used to describe force and motion! (304)

The simple proportionalities in physical laws are a form of "imaging," like proportionalities in the tabernacle of Moses. God impressed these symmetries and proportionalities on the world as a reflection of himself and his own beauty and symmetry. (312)

While the proportionality of the tabernacle tells us about God, the proportionality in the *human endeavors* of physics and math do not necessarily reflect God's nature. This interpretation of mathematics and physical laws seems to go beyond what "by good and necessary consequences may be deduced from Scripture" (WCF 1.6). Additionally, Newton's Laws of Motion have been found to be inaccurate and wrong. They are useful, but wrong. Did God "impress" Newton's erroneous physical laws on the world to reveal "his beauty and symmetry"? There is some beauty and mathematical harmony and symmetry in science, but scientific observations are, at times, chaotic. For example, experiments may have undermined a fundamental assumption of physics: nothing can go faster than the speed of light (*Nature*, Sept. 23, 2011). Experimental data keep messing up tidy, pretty scientific theories. There is symmetry, logic, and beauty in a chess game, but the chess game was not part of God's original creation and it does not reflect God's glory directly. In God's creation there is also ugliness, death, decay, destruction, and disorder.

Man's desire to force the world into a mathematical system may reflect a sinful desire. To use science, engineering, and mathematics to accomplish the cultural mandate is part of God's common grace for all men. But, man's desire for complete control and understanding will never be realized. Poythress presents the mathematical descriptions of creation as only reflective of the goodness of God's creation. Poythress discusses the fallenness of man's thinking extensively, but only once mentions the fallenness of the world as it now is. (121) The frustration encountered by scientists in attempting to solve the puzzle of "nature," should lead them to repent.

Poythress over-emphasizes the goodness and harmony of this world without acknowledging its brokenness and temporariness. Scripture describes creation's destruction as judgment on "the Day of the Lord" (*i.e.*, 2 Pet. 3:10–13). Poythress sees mostly goodness and order in this present earth (23). This is most evident in his speculations about the Trinity being revealed in physics, chemistry, and mathematics.

For Poythress, almost anything a mathematician can create reflects God's character, unity and diversity and the Trinity. "Mathematics offers a wonderful display of God's wisdom for those who are awake to its beauties and to God who ordained those beauties" (326). Math is beautiful and orderly. It also gives descriptions of natural phenomenon! However, what if mathematics is a man-made Tower of Babel seeking to reach heaven by human effort, not by God's grace and faith?

For the thoughtful reader there are additional authors who address related issues of faith and science. Two are worthy of note—Bacon and Bayle. Francis Bacon reacted against the Aristotelian scholasticism of the sixteenth-century church. Bacon found scholasticism to be sterile, useless, and enslaved to five or six Greeks. He described the crucial need for observation in *The New Organon*. This is a book which few study today. Bacon writes that reason is limited by various Idols of the Mind—Idols of the Tribe, Cave, Marketplace, and Theatre. These correspond to the limits due to fallen human nature, to prejudices of individuals, to inaccuracies of words, and to acceptance of received authority, respectively.

The relationship between reason and Christian faith was addressed by Pierre Bayle (1647–1706, French Calvinist) in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary*. Similar to Bacon, Bayle both valued and was skeptical of human reasoning. Bacon's solution was to have men gather experimental data, lots of it, and formulate and test their theories and repeat the process. Bayle's solution was to emphasize the necessity of Christian faith which trusts special revelation *alone* and remains skeptical of human reason, or observation.

Reading Poythress, Bayle, and Bacon will be fruitful for anyone with a very long attention span. None of these men are "sound bite" compatible. Study science and faith with them. While this review has spent more words on perceived weaknesses, don't think the book is unworthy of your attention. Perhaps, it is because the book is so strong in general that its weaknesses "popped out" to this reviewer. To a lover of music, the few notes that are played out of tune stick out in an extraordinary symphony. In summary *Redeeming Science* is an extraordinary symphony for the lover of God's Truth.

**Stephen A. Migotsky** is an Orthodox Presbyterian minister serving as the pastor of Jaffrey Presbyterian Church in Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

# ServantPoetry

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Christina Rossetti (1830-1894)

## A Better Resurrection

HAVE no wit, no words, no tears;  
My heart within me like a stone  
Is numb'd too much for hopes or fears;  
Look right, look left, I dwell alone;  
I lift mine eyes, but dimm'd with grief  
No everlasting hills I see;  
My life is in the falling leaf:  
O Jesus, quicken me.

My life is like a faded leaf,  
My harvest dwindled to a husk:  
Truly my life is void and brief  
And tedious in the barren dusk;  
My life is like a frozen thing,  
No bud nor greenness can I see:  
Yet rise it shall—the sap of Spring;  
O Jesus, rise in me.

My life is like a broken bowl,  
A broken bowl that cannot hold  
One drop of water for my soul  
Or cordial in the searching cold;  
Cast in the fire the perish'd thing;  
Melt and remould it, till it be  
A royal cup for Him, my King:  
O Jesus, drink of me.