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Protestants and Natural Law

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It is a longstanding commonplace in Christian thought that Protestantism distinguishes its moral theology from that of Roman Catholicism by its rejection of natural law. The idea of natural law has long formed the spinal column of Catholic social teaching. Modern Protestantism, by contrast, has no comparable coherent framework for grounding its social thought. As long as ago as 1891, on the occasion of the publication of one of the great documents of Catholic social teaching, *Rerum Novarum*, the Dutch Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper conceded the Protestant disadvantage: "It must be admitted to our shame that the Roman Catholics are far ahead of us in their study of the social question. Indeed, very far ahead. . . . The action of the Roman Catholics should spur us Protestants to show more dynamism. . . . The Encyclical of Leo XIII gives the principles which are common to all Christians, and which we share with our Roman Catholic compatriots."

The idea of natural law embodied in *Rerum Novarum* assumes that there is a universal law to which people of all races, classes, cultures, and religions have access by their natural reason. Natural law thus serves as a bridge category on ethical and social questions between church and world, between those with *a priori* commitment to sacred Scripture and the Christian creed and those outside the community of faith.

In much of modern Protestant theology doubt prevails as to the viability of such an appeal to reason and natural law in the construction of Christian social ethics. The bridge between church and world has been shattered. Thus what the churches have to say on social issues has no way of reaching the other side, and the churches end up in dangerous isolation from society, speaking only to themselves.

H. Richard Niebuhr's classic *Christ and Culture* depicts five models of relationship between the church and society. At one extreme are those who set Christ against culture, which leads to a sectarian strategy of withdrawing from the world into separate Christian communities. At the other extreme–Christ of culture–are those who collapse their Christian identity into the cultural *Zeitgeist*, thus becoming culture–conforming Christians. The middle three models represent the typical Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist ways of relating Christianity and culture. Catholics have held rather firmly to natural law thinking in constructing their social teachings. The modern representatives of the two branches of the Reformation, Lutherans and Calvinists, have not so clearly retained a firm foothold in natural law theory. In fact, they swing erratically between a position of utter rejection of natural law and one of conditional acceptance. Almost never do they concede as much to natural law as we find in modern Catholic social teaching.

My purpose in what follows is to tell the story of the inner Protestant struggle over the question of natural law, from complete rejection in Barthian covenant theology to qualified acceptance in a Lutheran theology that draws a proper distinction between law and gospel, creation and redemption. Beyond that, I want to propose that Protestant social ethics reappropriate the natural law tradition, taking into account the validity of its own tradition of criticism and placing natural law carefully within theological brackets defined by principles articulated in the Reformation tradition (particularly in the Lutheran branch that I know best), and with an added twist of eschatological theology.

My interest in this project is ecumenically motivated. Lutherans have officially engaged in dialogues with Roman Catholics for over twenty–five years, covering numerous doctrinal topics such as ministry, baptism, eucharist, authority, papacy, Mary and the saints, and most recently Scripture and tradition. But I would submit that social ethics is also a challenging area in which to explore our differences. If and when this is done, the use and interpretation of natural law will necessarily become a focal point.

I

Karl Barth is a central figure in the branch of modern Protestantism that rejects natural law. Barth held that Christian ethics has no use for an approach that concerns itself with universal principles inscribed in human nature and ascertainable by reason. Instead, he insisted, ethics is based directly on the command of the living God, which "is always an individual command for the conduct of this man, at this moment and in this situation; a prescription for this case of his; a prescription for the choice of a definite possibility of human intention, decision, and action." Here we have the root of Protestant situation ethics, later popularized and reduced to a humanistic framework by Joseph Fletcher.

Barth never provided a systematic treatment of natural law, but throughout his various stages of development he battled against every appeal to natural theology or natural law. As he said, theological ethics that bases itself on the Word of God alone "will not, then, make the disastrous, traitorous use of 'natural' theology, which is the only use that can be made of it." He saw natural law as the self–assertion of autonomous humanity and natural religion, and, for this reason, he felt he had to speak an irreconcilable "no" to every attempt to derive ethical norms either from the orders of creation, as Lutherans did, or from nature, as Catholics did.

Barth, of course, recognized that there is such a thing as natural law, in the same sense as he recognized that there is human religion. At its best, natural law is the quest for order on the part of the state and of non–Christians, who have no other source of knowledge, inasmuch as they do not derive their knowledge from above, that is, from divine revelation in Christ and the Bible. The dilemma for Barthian Christians is how it is possible to engage in public ethical discourse in a pluralistic world, when the majority, who are non–Christian, do not accept the Christian source of revelation. Barth's refusal to find common ground or an apologetic bridge on which both Christians and non–Christians could walk and talk was not convincing to other theologians–notably Emil Brunner–who resumed an interest in natural law, although always seemingly with something of a bad conscience on account of Barth's strictures.

Barth was not alone in rejecting natural law. Perhaps his most faithful disciple in this area was Jacques Ellul. In *The Theological Foundations of Law* (1960) Ellul based all of law and justice on Christology. The whole world and the entire human situation, he argued, have changed on account of God's revelation and redemptive act in Christ. It follows that law also must be affected by this event. Christians and non–Christians are both objectively in a new situation, since Christ died for all and was raised for the world's justification. Whatever has been called natural law henceforth loses its determinative character and is relativized by justification.

The problem with this thoroughgoing Christological version of natural law, of course, is that it is derived from a source that non–Christians do not share. Once again–no bridge, no common ground. Since the majority do not live within the covenant community and do not share its faith, what basis is there for cooperation between Christians and non–Christians in the public orders of life? We are confronted either by a triumphalist theology of glory in which Christians must conquer the public space, or by sectarian withdrawal into ghetto–like communities alongside, and outside, the world. The hermeneutical issue becomes a burning one. If everything bearing on law and justice is derived from the Bible on account of Christ and is known exclusively by the community of believers, then how is it possible for non–Christians to do what is good and right?

The Protestant rejection of natural law has found expression in American circles in the ethics of Paul Lehmann and Stanley Hauerwas. Lehmann, who was professor of ethics at Harvard Divinity School, renounced natural law theory in the name of his "koinonia ethics." Following Barth, he rejected the idea "that there is a common link between the believer and the nonbeliever grounded in the nature of human reason which enables both believer and nonbeliever to make certain ethical judgments and to address themselves in concert to commonly acknowledged ethical situations." Stanley Hauerwas flatly asserts that "Christian ethics theologically does not have a stake in 'natural law' understood as an independent and sufficient morality." Ethics for Hauerwas stands exclusively on the basis of the story about God that Christians learn from the Bible within the context of a covenant community.

II

Why did the tradition of natural law fall on hard times in Protestant theology? One might plausibly imagine that the reason lies deeply embedded in the Reformation theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin. However, John T. McNeill, the Reformation historian, concludes otherwise:

> There is no real discontinuity between the teaching of the Reformers and that of their predecessors with respect to natural law. Not one of the leaders of the Reformation assails the principle. Instead, with the possible exception of Zwingli, they all on occasion express a quite ungrudging respect for the moral law naturally implanted in the human heart and seek to inculcate this attitude in their readers. Natural law is not one of the issues on which they bring the Scholastics under criticism. With safeguards of their primary doctrines, but without conscious resistance on their part, natural law enters into the framework of their thought and is an assumption of their political and social teaching. . . . For the Reformers, as for the Fathers, canonists, and Scholastics, natural law stood affirmed on the pages of Scripture.

The pressure to abandon the teaching of natural law stemmed not so much from the Reformation as from post–Enlightenment developments in philosophy, especially utilitarianism and positivism. There was a loss of belief not only in a special divine revelation through Scripture and the church, but also in the ability of reason to discern a natural moral order in human affairs. The way was prepared for law to become an instrument of power: might makes right. The positivistic attitude toward law and its validity rendered people impotent in the face of the lawlessness of law. With the collapse of the religious and metaphysical foundations of justice, the totalitarian state could successfully manipulate law as a mere function of absolute power. There was no other criterion of validity for the law than the will of those who had the monopoly of force. The twentieth century has paid a heavy price in legalized atrocities and crimes against humanity as a result of the ascendancy of legal positivism in classrooms, legislatures, and courtrooms.

After World War II, it seemed as though many people had had enough. Protestant theologians were invited to reconsider the relation between Christian faith and law. Churches gained a renewed sense of responsibility for the process and quality of law in social life. The World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation sponsored conferences to discuss the proper theological response to legal positivism. They debated whether Christian ethics and natural law are in fact antithetical or perhaps instead complementary.

The results of the conferences and new publications in the field of Christian ethics showed that Protestant theologians were in a quandary about natural law. Theologians like Helmut Thielicke and Walter Kunneth moved away from Barth's rejection of natural law, but were still concerned to reiterate the chief Protestant theological objections to the concept. Natural law came to be seen as a kind of necessary evil, or as an illegitimate child who could not be completely abandoned, but whose rights must be severely restricted.

The chief reason for this theological hesitancy to fully recognize natural law is the problem of sin. Natural law seems to suggest that the order of being in the original creation has not been totally disrupted by the fall and sin. Further, it suggests that human reason is not so blinded as to be incapable of reading the will of God in the natural structures of creation. On the contrary, Protestants have wanted to argue, the *imago dei* is so fully destroyed that there remains only a negative relationship to God. In this view, natural law theory is guilty of elevating reason above revelation as criterion and standard of what is right and wrong, true and false. In a fallen world, there are no absolute laws or immutable orders untainted by sin. Thielicke says that, since the fall, we confront at best "orders of preservation." And Kunneth speaks of "emergency orders" through which God is working to sustain human life in a fallen world. Natural law also lacks the eschatological perspective that relegates all orders of life to provisional status, always ambiguous and incomplete, moving along in history in the realm of contingency and novelty.

Despite their criticisms, theologians like Thielicke and Kunneth cannot really dispense with natural law. They recognize that it has abiding significance as the sign of the human quest for justice and right. Heuristically, it functions as a goad to the pursuit of approximate justice in an imperfect world. The church needs to respect the common search for justice and law and to promote cooperation between Christians and non–Christians in all spheres of public life. Nonetheless, even with such half–hearted concessions to natural law, it seems clear that these Protestant theologians could not make significant contributions to its renewal and furtherance in society. They write of it with an uneasy conscience, as though natural law has become forbidden fruit for Protestant theology.

Catholic theologians rightly complain that when Protestants write about natural law, they always take the worst–case scenario, as though there had not also been a history of revision of natural law theory. They complain that when Protestant theologians write about natural law, they see it as something fixed, always and everywhere the same and always perceptible as such, as though it existed above and beyond history in a static world of eternal principles.

Caricatures of natural law abound in Protestant textbooks on social and political ethics. We have only to cite the works of Jacques Maritain and John Courtney Murray to see that the usual caricatures do not match the actual representations of natural law theory under the conditions of modern times. Who would wish to argue that these Catholic intellectuals are out of touch with the changing and diverse constellation of factors that the facts of historical development impose on the church and its social context? Their commitment to natural law did not make them medieval philosophers who would depreciate historical particularity and historical process or ignore the imperative that the concrete uniqueness of each situation of decision and action be attended to.

The common criticism of Roman Catholic natural law theorists on the part of Protestant theology is twofold. As Catholics, in distinction from the Protestant Reformers, they do not take sin seriously. As Romans, they are bound to a medieval philosophy–namely, Aristotelian Thomism–and thus cannot take history seriously. Such caricatures and charges are the stuff of which serious ecumenical conversations could be made–but as far as I know, that is a task that remains to be accomplished.

An ecumenical dialogue on the place of natural law in Christian social ethics is particularly necessary and timely, in my opinion, as a kind of counterattack against the wholesale deconstruction of the classical moral and legal principles on which Western culture is founded. Deconstructionism and its academic allies hold that meaning and truth are imposed on texts and situations and are not inherent in the way things are created. The pursuit of truth and justice is increasingly spurned in the academy and replaced with politically correct ideology. Moral relativism joins with political activism to sabotage the rules and standards needed to implement a societal system ordered by principles of justice and truth. When the normlessness and the nihilistic effects of the deconstructionist mindset are no longer confined to academia, but invade the wider public, the way is prepared for the moral collapse of social institutions or for the enthronement of the totalitarian state. The love affair of some of the founding deconstructionists with the Nazis has been widely reported and should not surprise us. Perhaps it is time to expose current relativist and nihilist theories as the underside of totalitarian ideologies and political authoritarianism. A revival of natural law can be of use in that project.

III

As already indicated, there was in the early dialectical theology of modern Protestantism an extreme antithesis between biblical revelation and natural law. There followed, in the name of faithfulness to biblical revelation, a kind of contempt for natural theology, natural law, and natural reason. And even among Protestants who allow a limited role for natural law in the construction of social ethics, it functioned mostly as a symbolic sign of the human quest for justice in the social order.

Yet there are Protestant theologians who hold to a positive correlation, correspondence, and cooperation between revelation and natural law. They see no necessary opposition between evangelical faith that focuses on the justification of the ungodly on account of Christ and the Catholic doctrine of natural law with its appeal to a universal justice and morality to which people have access through their reason and conscience. An eclectic variety of Protestants–from a Lutheran like Paul Althaus to a Reformed theologian like Emil Brunner to a philosophical theologian like Paul Tillich–holds to a more positive view of natural law. Wolfhart Pannenberg also comes down decidedly on the side of finding an anthropological foundation for asserting a common core of justice and law to which all people in principle have access through reason and conscience, even if the particulars of that common ground are provisional, relative, and always ambiguous under the conditions of our finite human existence. Pannenberg's theological perspective keeps the eschatological horizon in focus at all times.

This new affirmation of natural law would also seek a rehabilitation of reason. Reason has suffered a tragic history, and Protestants have often derived a certain *Schadenfreude* from reports of its demise. When reason is discredited, suffers calamity and chaos, theology seems justified in making a retreat to the safe haven of fideism. Yet with reason disqualified, faith becomes overloaded and the wires of faith overheated. Out of such fideism often come direct sorties into the public realm, carried on without benefit of any rational accountability. We may call this the Ayatollah Khomeini phenomenon, one whose effects are equally dangerous no matter in which particular god's name the crusade is being undertaken.

It is necessary to correct the widespread assumption that from the presuppositions of Reformation theology there can be no access to natural law, as though the Reformation's view of Scripture, revelation, Christ, salvation, and faith barred the door to every kind of natural theology, natural law, and rational morality. But it must be equally clear that evangelical theology will hold to a highly circumscribed view of natural law, one that is placed within theological brackets, so that it does not function in separation from the whole of theology. Edmund Schlink, professor of systematic and ecumenical theology at Heidelberg University, spelled out the conditions under which a theologian can take up natural law. Natural law, he said, cannot be a doctrine that establishes the rights of humankind before God. Humans have no rights *coram deo*, but only *coram hominibus*. Because of the fall into sin, there is no ontological continuity between the original creation and the new creation that is apprehended through faith alone. The church's primary task is to proclaim Christ to the nations for the world's salvation. Nevertheless, the church does have a political responsibility during the interim between the first and the final advent of Christ. It is within this interim that the limited but necessary function of natural law must be maintained.

Lutherans need not have any confessional scruples about affirming such a limited role for natural law. It is necessary to observe the proper distinction between the *coram* relationships. *Coram deo* and *coram hominibus* are two different levels of relationship. *Coram deo*, humans are not capable of doing anything that is right before God, anything on the basis of which God is required to set humans in a right relationship with himself. Sin disrupts the right relationship between God and humanity. But this does not negate the fact that humans are capable of doing what is good and right in the order of human relationships, *coram hominibus*. Natural law possesses no theological significance in the sense of providing a basis of human salvation. Yet the negative verdict on natural law in the vertical dimension need not entail a corresponding rejection of natural law on the horizontal line. The choice between biblical revelation and natural law is a false one.

A concept of natural law in critical correlation with evangelical theology need not retain the particular metaphysical foundations it received in the medieval Thomistic–Aristotelian synthesis. The idea of a law rooted in the nature of humanity and the world and discoverable by reason has been traced back to the "dawn of conscience." The history of natural law shows a wide variety of interpretations and applications. The Protestant polemic against natural law has been directed primarily against the medieval Thomistic theory of natural law, but that does not mean that the Protestant mind must be closed to any and every concept of natural law. The word "nature" in natural law can mean different things. It may mean the immanent structure of human reason, that which all human beings have in common by virtue of being human beings. Its theological correlate would, thus, simply be the *imago dei*. Or "nature" may refer to an ideal state in some Golden Age in the past, as in Rousseau's "return to nature," uncorrupted by civilization. Or it may refer to the fallen condition of humanity, as in the familiar words of the confession: "We confess unto thee, O Lord, that we are by nature sinful and unclean."

There are similar variations of meaning with respect to the term "law." "Law" may refer to a moral principle written into human hearts by God and therefore possessing universal validity. Or law may be something imposed on human beings from the outside, by the authority of God or the State or some other power. It may refer to the Ten Commandments, the Torah, or the Sermon on the Mount. It may refer to the inalienable rights of human beings that all nations are morally bound to acknowledge. When we put "nature" and "law" together, we confront a legion of possible meanings. We cannot *a priori* foreclose the possibility that a concept of natural law is fully compatible with a theological framework faithful to the confessional writings of the Reformation. Thus we cannot agree with Jacques Ellul when he writes that "the doctrine of natural law as a Christian doctrine is . . . ruled out at every point."

IV

We conclude with a schematic outline of a reinterpretation of natural law within the basic principles of evangelical theology.

1. We have to begin with the fact that none of the confessional documents of the Reformation, neither those of the Lutheran nor of the Calvinist traditions, rejected the notion of natural law. There was nothing in their interpretation of the Scriptures that called for such a rejection. In fact, they acknowledged that Scripture teaches that the Gentiles, although outside the scope of God's special revelation to Israel, are able to know something of God's law through the works of creation by means of conscience and reason. To be sure, the Reformers, as biblical theologians, were primarily concerned to draw the proper contrast between the old law and the new on account of Christ. But at the same time, they acknowledged that the biblical authors do to some degree recognize elements of the law of God among the Gentiles, a law that in some way must be related to the law of creation that reaches its perfection in Christ.

2. An evangelical theology will interpret the role of natural law in light of the hermeneutical distinction between law and gospel. In light of this dialectic, it is possible to develop a Christian understanding of the world and all secular institutions. The word *gospel* refers to the absolute particularity and uniqueness of the message concerning God's coming into the world in the person of Jesus Christ. This places all law in a new light; the legalistic character of the law is contrasted with the creative freedom of the gospel.

3. Along with the particularity of the gospel which rests on the *solus Christus*, evangelical theology will want to insist on the other *solas*, such as *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and *sola scriptura.* But evangelical theology will assert that these *solas* are also good Catholic theology, as Karl Rahner has vigorously argued in *Foundations of Christian Faith* (1978). He writes:

> For a Catholic understanding of the faith there is no reason why the basic concern of Evangelical Christianity as it comes to expression in the three "only's" should have no place in the Catholic Church. Accepted as basic and ultimate formulas of Christianity, they do not have to lead a person out of the Catholic Church. . . . They can call the attention of the Catholic church again and again to the fact that grace alone and faith alone really are what saves, and that with all our maneuvering through the history of dogma and the teaching office, we Catholic Christians must find our way back to the sources again and again, back to the primary origins of Holy Scripture and all the more so of the Holy Spirit.

With such clear provisos, much of the passionate criticism of Protestant theology directed against the place of natural law in Catholic moral theology might be deflected. The Reformation *solas* function to relativize natural theology, natural law, and the orders–of–creation theology so that they cannot be used as an independent starting point and approach to the knowledge of God with any salvific potential. The law is not a way of salvation; at best, it is a way in which God's preserving grace is effective in ordering the world.

4. The doctrine of original sin must be taken seriously. This means that the fundamental structure of reality, including the rational and social nature of humanity, is deeply affected by sin. We live in a fallen world in which demonic forces have been let loose, distorting everything, including human reason. The image of God in humanity is not totally destroyed; rather, it is disoriented, putting humanity in a wrong relationship with God and the world. If the original creation, including the *imago dei*, is thought to be totally destroyed or depraved, this leads to a kind of Protestant pessimism that places all ethics within the order of redemption and the new creation. This partly accounts for the fact that Protestant ethics has tended to be purely personalistic and voluntaristic, relying on discrete commands announced by God now and then, in this situation or that. Protestant ethics shows a marked tendency to fall into pure occasionalism, actualism, and situationism. The fundamental givens are either denied altogether or ignored, so that the ethical decision is made existentially in each moment and each situation. With the loss of general rules and enduring principles, it is difficult to find a bridge to the public orders of life in which Christians and non–Christians can work side by side.

5. An evangelical social ethic will integrate the eschatological perspective into its ethical theory. The eschatological kingdom of God's love is communicated through the gospel as the justification of the ungodly and sinners on account of Christ, but it is communicated through worldly structures of power and justice under the conditions of a sinful world. This is the basis of Luther's distinction between the two realms or two kingdoms, and correlates with the two states of believing existence in the world, as *simul justus et peccator*.

6. The proper work of love is expressed by the gospel as the forgiveness of sins and new life in Christ. The strange work of love (*opus alienum*) is expressed by the law as God's instrument to effect justice in a world that does not believe in the gospel. Justice is too important a matter for God simply to leave to loving persons. Justice can be accomplished in the world in either of two ways: by the miraculous presence and spontaneity of love or by the pressure and threats of the law. The concept of natural law in one sense is misleading because, when people do what comes naturally, it is neither very just nor very loving. Nevertheless, the idea of natural law is indispensable because it aims to establish a criterion of justice that transcends human conventions or habits and that, in some way, is universally intelligible. The love of God is strangely at work behind the back of every human being, seeking justice through law that cannot be identified with mere custom, arbitrariness, power, or interest.

7. Love that expresses itself as justice and by means of law is not at all antithetical to principles and rules that can be clearly formulated to prescribe as well as to guide the ethical decisions and moral actions of human beings and institutions. The antinomian idea that love cannot be mediated by rule and principle has sneaked into situation ethics and hides behind the *agape* label, as though there were no way to translate love into the language of moral norms and principles.

8. When the rule of God's love expresses itself indirectly and *sub contario* through structures of justice and law, rules can be formulated in advance of particular situations. For example, with respect to freedom and equality, rules have been formulated in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Similarly, there could be no World Court to try war criminals if there were no preexisting consensus on what is lawful in warfare. The notion that there are no rules but only situations is an unrealistic appraisal of the human condition outside of Paradise, this side of Eden. Thus the primary commitment of Christian ethics to the truth and power of love, as manifest supremely in the Christ event, relates to law in a dialectically differentiated way, true to the complexities of the human situation within the fallen world and the new things inaugurated by the inbreaking of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ.

9. An evangelical social ethic will necessarily correlate eschatology and natural law, or it will forfeit its right to be considered a biblically Christian viewpoint. One chief problem of traditional natural law theory is that it seems to be more at home in a deistic view of God and the world than in a trinitarian vision which alone can span the whole field of reality from creation to consummation. The final truth of all things is revealed by the arrival of the eschatological future in the person of Jesus Christ. The eschatological future of the kingdom is the power that draws all people, whether they know it or not. This power has been revealed in Jesus Christ as the highest good which all people implicitly seek in their quest for fulfillment. Therefore, when people strive for justice under the conditions of its absence–and this goes on in all societies–they are in quest of something true and transcendent that for them is still future and yet to be fulfilled. From the Christian point of view, this highest good is the kingdom of God which Jesus proclaimed and embodied in his very person. The universal human quest for justice can be seen to be the anticipatory presence of the kingdom of God at work throughout the created order, even under the conditions of sin and estrangement. Natural law can be viewed as the presence of the kingdom of God in the universal human striving for what is good and right. It is fortunate that "natural law" has been kept alive in Roman Catholic moral theology, but somewhat regrettable that it has survived in a non–eschatological framework and is therefore also often not attuned to the dynamics of history. The merits of the natural law tradition can be taken up into the framework of an eschatological perspective.

10. Openness to the tradition of natural law prevents Christian ethics from absorbing itself totally within the realm of individual personal relationships, which has been the trend in Protestant existentialism. While it is necessary to distinguish between the individual–personal and the social–political dimensions of the kingdom of God, it is important not to separate them as though the realm of personal relations were unrelated to the realm of social involvements and political institutions. The non–eschatological form of the two–kingdoms ethic in conservative Lutheranism has tended to dichotomize personal ethics and social ethics.

11. When natural law is baptized by Christian theology, it may be seen as the means by which God is ordering the world on its way forward to the final judgment and consummation. The hope of the world does not lie in optimism about nature and law or in schemes for patching up the old creation; it lies rather in announcing the advent of a new creation in Christ. Even the most splendidly ordered world, even a veritable utopia on earth, would still exist in open rebellion against the gospel, counting on a righteousness of works in opposition to the righteousness of unmerited grace that is a gift from above.

12. The introduction of the eschatological perspective may be disheartening to Christians who dream about a Christian world order and rely on Christian social activism to save the world, or who believe the church ought to remake the world after its own image. On the other hand, the strategy of linking the eschatological perspective to natural law to provide common ground for Christians and non–Christians to share burdens for maintaining and ordering the world may appear as compromise to radical Christians who hear the call of the gospel to leave the world and escape the coming fire and judgment. The problem of natural law arises for Christians who take the intermediate position and accept responsibility for the preservation and ordering of the world. We may think of this in terms of believers cooperating with God in preserving the world so that the world may be given time to learn of its true destiny in the kingdom of God.

13. It may appear that the eschatological perspective has so relativized natural law that it hardly deserves to be called natural law anymore. In that perspective, our liberties are relative, our rights are relative. There are no absolute laws, no unconditioned principles in this world which, from the perspective of God's judgment, is passing away and is meanwhile maintained only by permission of the divine patience. We have set limits to natural law by placing it within theological brackets because from the perspective of God's final revelation in Jesus Christ not too much should be expected from the possibilities of human nature and human reason. God does not save the world through natural law; God does not reconcile the world through the pursuit of justice; God does not transform human hearts through the struggles for human rights; God does not create a community of love by all of our best efforts to order the world for the better. To know this is to draw the proper distinction between law and gospel, as Lutherans would put it, or between nature and grace, as Catholics have traditionally said it. There is a distinction between these different conceptualities, but not of the kind or to a degree that would necessitate Protestants' continued rejection of natural law for the sake of magnifying the gospel.

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