# Session 2 : Public Truth

## Aquinas and The Reformers: Natural Law and Scripture

We just saw that the Bible gives some clear and important principles as we think through the relationship of the Christian faith and the public square. Out of love, we should seek the peace of our society, and we want to be actors for human flourishing around us. But then the question comes, "How do we know what is good for political decisions?" To find out what is good, we are forced to think about what is true.

I remember when I was a student I was invited to go talk to people about the gospel at Santa Monica beach near LA. We handed out a tract and said, "Here's some truth from God's word." I distinctly remember the reaction just from my phrase "Here's some truth from God's word"—it was immediate disgust.

Sometimes in the political context, just blasting out "Here is the truth from God's word, the Bible!" does not make much impact—or worse, a similar reaction of disgust. Yet if we are going to love, that is what we inevitably need to do, right? So how do we think about the relationship between God's truth and our political involvement?

That's why this talk will focus on truth, the Bible, and the public square. To do that, let's talk about natural law. Natural law is a subcategory of what theologians call "general revelation"—what God has revealed in creation—and the second is special revelation, God's ultimate word that he gives us in Christ. We narrow these categories in the moral domain and talk about that general revelation as a natural law.

What I would like to do here is look backwards to history and listen to how several key theologians, especially those during the Reformation, thought about the relationship between the ultimate truth of God's word and the truth that we can come to via reflecting on human nature and the creation. It's what we can call the natural law, or natural principles.

First, I want to look at the concept of natural law, then how the reformers thought about natural law, and why natural law is significant and helpful as we think about Christ in the public square.

## 1. What is natural law?

The concept of a natural law goes back to Plato and his discussion with other Greek philosophers.[1] The Sophists, who were a group of philosophers, said that political rule was essentially the rule of the strong over the weak. "Might makes right." Plato said, "No, political rule does not come down to just who is the stronger. Humans have the capacity to reason with rational arguments, and there are ethical realities that are true and just and should be the basis of political rule."

Since Plato, many thinkers, philosophers, and theologians have held that there are ethical truths that can be discerned through reason that give us the basis to act rightly. In the words of C.S. Lewis, "Human beings, all over the earth, have this curious idea that they ought to behave in a certain way, and cannot really get rid of it" (Lewis, 1952/2012: 8).[2] He is pointing out that there is a moral standard that almost every culture, even every person, is aware of. There are some differences between cultures, but the differences are never totally different visions of morality. There is a striking and profound unity that injustice and cowardice are wrong, and love and harmony are good.

Here is a definition in a recent book by three evangelical authors where they define the Christian view of the natural law:
"In the Christian intellectual tradition, the natural law has for centuries described a set of stable, morally obliging norms for human action, grounded in a common human nature".[3]

What do they mean? Reality has a certain moral framework that we can know. There are moral realities that can be discovered and affirmed through human reason. They are moral norms—stable, unchanging, always true no matter what culture we are a part of. These moral principles are essential for human flourishing, both individually and as a society.

The Bible itself affirms this universal moral knowledge. For example, in the Old Testament God holds the other nations accountable for their moral behavior even though they don't have access to the full law like the people of Israel do. Or it's interesting that before the Ten Commandments, God can hold people accountable for not obeying the Ten Commandments—for example, Cain's murder.

In the New Testament, Paul in the letter to the Romans gives us a key passage where he explains that all people have a certain moral knowledge because we are created in God's image.

Romans 2:14–15 (ESV) — 14 *For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. 15 They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts…*

So the non-Jewish people, the Gentiles, do not have access to the 10 Commandments. But by nature they do what the law requires. So they have a basic knowledge of what the law requires and the work of the law written inside.

If you start to study how theologians have thought about the Natural Law, one thinker that is very important is Thomas Aquinas.

He says that the eternal law is how God orders all of creation, and everything "participates" in that law by acting according to its nature.[4] The natural law was the part of God's eternal law that could be discerned by human reason.

Let me quote from his *Summa Theologica*:[5]

"It is therefore evident that the natural law is nothing else than the rational creature's participation in the eternal law."

Practically, Aquinas held that the "natural law is primarily ethics insofar as it is concerned with practical reasoning about how individuals and communities do good and avoid evil when making choices and acting."[6]

Aquinas' teaching on the Natural Law will have a long-lasting influence on Roman Catholic theology. Down until today, Natural Law is often quickly associated with Catholic thought and theology. What is interesting is that recently evangelicals have not been very comfortable with putting a lot of emphasis on the natural law because it feels too Catholic. But let's look at how the Reformers understood the Natural Law.

## 2. How did the reformers understand the natural law?

What we find is that the Reformers didn't radically change Aquinas' view on natural law. However, what the Reformers will emphasize is that the effect of sin vastly limits our capacity to discern the natural law apart from God's revelation in the Bible.

Here is what Martin Luther said about natural law.
In his essay entitled "On Secular Authority" he says it this way:

"For when you judge according to love you will easily decide and adjust matters without any lawbooks. But when you ignore love and natural law you will never hit upon the solution that pleases God, though you may have devoured all the lawbooks and jurists."[7]

One thing to note is that in general the Reformers held that the Ten Commandments repeated and clarified the natural law, especially the "second table" of the Ten Commandments, the horizontal commands (6-10) that dealt with human relationships.

"For even if a Moses had never appeared and Abraham had never been born, the Ten Commandments would have had to rule in all men from the very beginning, as they indeed did and still do."[8]

What is he saying? He is essentially saying that the 10 commandments are clear even without knowing the Ten Commandments!

Now, what is interesting is then to look at how the Protestant reformers thought of the Natural law. Let's listen to Philipp Melanchthon, who was a close friend of Martin Luther and wrote a more systematic presentation of Lutheran theology.

In his section on Natural Law he writes, "Just as light is divinely placed in the eyes, there are certain innate knowledges in human minds by which they recognize and judge many things".[9]

He also says, "Natural law…is the natural knowledge about God and the governance of customs, that is, the distinction between what is honorable and what is unworthy, inherent in humanity and divinely implanted in every human being, just as the knowledge of numbers is divinely implanted in human minds."[10]

He and others emphasized natural law when it came to the public square. "External civil life," he wrote, "is to be regulated according to this natural light".[11]

So he affirms that everyone has some knowledge by which we can recognize and judge many things. He is talking about moral things, good and bad. Right away, we can see that Melanchthon, who will disagree about a lot of things that he inherited from medieval thinkers and theologians, like Aquinas, that came before him, does not do away with the idea of a natural law.

Listen to what Calvin says about this idea of a natural law. This is from book II of the *Institutes*.

He goes on to say, "This would not be a bad definition: natural law is that apprehension of the conscience which distinguishes sufficiently between just and unjust, and which deprives men of the excuse of ignorance, while it proves them guilty by their own testimony" (II.2.22).

"We call it the moral law, because it is taken from the testimony of natural law and of conscience which God has engraved upon the hearts of men." *Institutes* II.8.1

This applies to human governing.

"Of the first class the following ought to be said: since man is by nature a social animal, he tends through natural instinct to foster and preserve society. Consequently, we observe that there exist in all men's minds universal impressions of a certain civic fair dealing and order. Hence no man is to be found who does not understand that every sort of human organization must be regulated by laws, and who does not comprehend the principles of those laws. Hence arises that unvarying consent of all nations and of individual mortals with regard to laws. For their seeds have, without teacher or lawgiver, been implanted in all men."[12]

"Unvarying consent"—I think he means the need for law. Anarchy has not been the default political framework down through history.

What is he saying? Well, he is saying something pretty close to Aquinas, isn't he? Everyone can comprehend the principles of these laws that regulate human organization.

What is important to make clear is that neither Aquinas nor the Reformers held that natural law was sufficient to bring us to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. For that, God has to speak words to us; he has to give us his special and specific understanding when he spoke through the prophets and apostles.

So the Reformers argued that there is such a thing as a moral reality to the world that can be discerned by reason. However, that is not quite the end of the story. The Reformers insisted on the difficulty we have in knowing the natural law due to our fallen nature. This was not new. Augustine describes human knowledge apart from Scripture as "twilight" as opposed to "daylight."[13] We can see some things in the darkness of the twilight, but it's very different from the blaze of daylight. Aquinas also mentions this problem, but Calvin and the Reformed emphasized it much more.

Listen to how he qualifies our natural knowledge in the *Institutes*: "Human understanding then possesses some power of perception, since it is by nature captivated by love of truth… Yet this longing for truth languishes before it enters upon its race because it soon falls into vanity. Indeed, man's mind, because of its dullness, cannot hold to the right path, but wanders through various errors and stumbles repeatedly, as if it were groping in darkness. This betrays how incapable it is of seeking and finding truth."[14]

Calvin goes on to say that our reason is especially in the darkness about "heavenly things"—earthly things, like what is just and unjust, are still relatively discernible.

What is he saying? We can perceive certain things, but it's not crystal clear. Which rings true, doesn't it? Everyone, like Lewis says, has a sense deep down that injustice is wrong. But we have huge disagreements about precisely what is right and wrong. There is a general moral reality that is part of creation. But because of the way sin has affected our reason, we can't access it perfectly. Only by the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit,

who illuminates our mind to see and accept that the Bible is God's revelation, are we able to discern more clearly.

Now let's try to think about how what Calvin and the other Reformers held can help us today in our specific context.

### 3. Why is thinking about natural law important?

Out of love, we want to see the good of our neighbors and our society. But to love, we have to affirm what is true. Without any moral foundations, it's almost impossible to love.

Let me close with three images—certainly limited illustrations—to think about why this is important for us today. The view of the Reformers on the natural law is like guardrails, a bridge, and a sunrise.

1. Guardrails

First, affirming a natural law is like guardrails guarding us from falling into two ditches on the side of the road. The first ditch would be thinking there is absolutely no natural law, no shared moral convictions. There is no point of connection between our Christian convictions and the rest of society apart from evangelism. There is a total disconnect.[15] Everyone would have to be a Christian to have any real influence. This would imply we have nothing at all to contribute to policy discussions, political debates. It would signal a total retreat and total indifference. This is not our calling. To engage in political action, thinking as a Christian is a good thing. But we do have a framework that we share.

But the guardrail of the reformers' view of Natural law also protects us from the other side of the ditch, which is to think that natural law is entirely sufficient to achieve a unified, harmonious society. If only everyone was rational and smart (like of course we are!), we'd all be on the same page. The Reformers' insistence on the influence of sin over our reason helps us understand and make sense of why political involvement is so fraught with tensions and disagreements. Our own reason has been deeply influenced by sin, and our neighbors' as well. It's far, far more complicated than making clear rational arguments. We can't expect to

bring in God's kingdom here and now through reason or through political policy.

2. A bridge

The reality of a moral structure to the universe provides a wonderful and powerful bridge between the Christian faith and our neighbors and others. My neighbor is created in God's image and has a profound and deep awareness of the right and wrong God put into our universe.

We can agree on some basic principles of justice and injustice. Of the reality of human rights. Because of those human rights, some limits on human government. I remember talking to a fellow pastor in the Chicago area, and he had had some contact with the local politicians. They had said, "We know about evangelicals—they only contact us to say they are opposed to any of our agendas."

There can be the subtle assumption that "we have the Bible, we have all the truth, and they on the other side don't have any." But that's just not true.

3. A sunrise

God's general revelation finds its far more beautiful and full meaning in the special revelation in the Gospel. Our knowledge of the natural law condemns us apart from Christ—but in Christ, we find the ultimate and full freedom. So the natural law is like the twilight vision, but that invites us to consider Jesus and see the sun actually rise. We can see some things by twilight, but it is so much more wonderful to see the sun rise. In the Bible, God gives us sunlight. Jesus, through whom all things were created and who is the center of the great story of redemption, is revealed to us in the Gospel and in the Bible.

C.S. Lewis begins his book, *Mere Christianity*, which was probably the most significant apologetic work of the 20th century, used to bring many intellectual seekers to faith. Part 1, entitled "Right and Wrong as a Clue to the Meaning of the Universe," in his first chapter points out that the Natural Law exists. The law points to a lawmaker—wonderful, terrible, true. In Jesus Christ we find the incarnation of the ultimate goodness and

the forgiveness and grace to change us so that we can share in his ultimate goodness. Let's invite other people to consider the sunrise.

Footnotes

1. Gregg, Samuel. *The Essential Natural Law (Essential Scholars)* (English Edition) (p. 21). Fraser Institute. Édition du Kindle. ↩

2. Quoted in Gregg, Samuel. *The Essential Natural Law (Essential Scholars)* (English Edition) (p. 8). Fraser Institute. Édition du Kindle. ↩

3. Covington, Jesse; McGraw, Bryan T.; Watson, Micah. *Hopeful Realism: Evangelical Natural Law and Democratic Politics* (English Edition) (p. 48). InterVarsity Press. Édition du Kindle. ↩

4. Covington, Jesse; McGraw, Bryan T.; Watson, Micah. *Hopeful Realism: Evangelical Natural Law and Democratic Politics* (English Edition) (p. 101). InterVarsity Press. Édition du Kindle. ↩

5. Aquinas, Thomas. *Summa Theologica*, Ia IIae q91, a2. ↩

6. Gregg, Samuel. *The Essential Natural Law (Essential Scholars)* (English Edition) (p. 24). Fraser Institute. Édition du Kindle. ↩

7. Luther, Martin. "Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed." In *Luther's Works*, vol. 45, *The Christian in Society II*, edited by Walther I. Brandt, 81-129. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962. ↩

8. Luther, Martin. "Against the Sabbatarians: Letter to a Good Friend." 1538. In *Luther's Works*. Volume 47: *Christian in Society IV*. Edited

by Franklin Sherman. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971. Pages 89–92, 94–95. Cited by Daryl Charles. ↩

9. Melanchthon, Philip. *Basic Concepts of Theology: Loci Praecipui Theologici 1559 (Systematics of the Protestant Reformation Book 1)* (English Edition) (p. 171).

10. Melanchthon, Philip. *Basic Concepts of Theology: Loci Praecipui Theologici 1559 (Systematics of the Protestant Reformation Book 1)* (English Edition) (p. 135).

11. Melanchthon, Philip. *Loci Communes* [1555], VII.

12. Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II, Chapter 2, Section 13. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.

13. Covington, Jesse; McGraw, Bryan T.; Watson, Micah. *Hopeful Realism: Evangelical Natural Law and Democratic Politics* (English Edition) (p. 52). InterVarsity Press.

14. Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.2.12. Battles edition, page 271.

15. "If there is no connection between revelation and reason, then you end up with two serious problems. One is that it then becomes impossible for Christians to talk to anyone else about the implications of their faith. You can't explain why it is a good idea to stay married for life or to give away a tithe of your income." Laurence, Timothy; Ovey, Mike; McIlroy, David; Grudem, Wayne; Chaplin, Jonathan. *Good News for the Public Square: A Biblical*

*framework for Christian engagement*, The Lawyers' Christian Fellowship.