

## *The First Step in Missions Training: How our Neighbors are Wrestling with God's General Revelation<sup>1</sup>*

### *Appendices for students of theology and the humanities*

#### **Appendix I: The missions training structure of the Epistle to the Romans.**

Thomas Schirrmacher has kindly provided the following chart of the structure of Paul's Epistle to the Romans, which documents and clarifies the way in which Paul's teaching is framed by his missionary purposes. It is this mission-oriented structure of Paul's teaching which pushes us to conclude that studying the book of Romans can constructively shape missions training today.<sup>2</sup>

<b>On the Framework of the Letter to the Romans: Parallels between Romans 1:1-15 and 15:14-16:27</b>		
1:1-6	The gospel was foretold in the Old Testament.	16:25-27
1:5	The obedience that comes from faith has to be proclaimed to all nations.	16:26; 15:18
1:7	Grace and peace to you . . .	16:20
1:8	The faith of the Roman Christians is known throughout the whole world.	16:19
1:8-13	Paul plans to travel to Rome via Jerusalem.	15:22-29
1:11-12	Paul seeks to be spiritually encouraged by the Christians in Rome.	15:24

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<sup>2</sup> This chart is from Thomas Schirrmacher, "The Book of Romans as a Charter for World Missions: Why mission and theology have to go together," a gift from the Theological Commission to the Missions Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, distributed at the meeting of the Missions Commission, November 7, 2011.

1:13	In spite of his wishes, Paul has been prevented from traveling to Rome up to this time.	15:22
1:13-15	The gospel has to be proclaimed to all peoples.	15:14-29; comp. 16:26

## Appendix II: The Rejection of General Revelation and the Natural Moral Law in Twentieth-Century Protestant Theology

Karl Barth's influence on the entire Protestant movement in the last century has been very large, especially in regard to considerations of general revelation and God's natural moral law. He led the rejection of natural law and general revelation as normally accepted themes in Protestant theology and ethics during the twentieth century. Most other Protestant thinkers who reject natural law ethics and general revelation as important topics in theology and philosophy are either followers of Barth or have been in some way influenced by the climate of opinion shaped by Barth's thought. This academic question is worthy of serious attention among students of theology and humanities, especially if one is convinced that biblically shaped training for the mission God has entrusted to the church will start by considering God's general revelation very carefully.

### 1. Karl Barth (1886-1968)

"Human righteousness is, as we have seen, in itself an illusion: there is in this world no observable righteousness. There may, however, be a righteousness before God, a righteousness that comes from Him."<sup>3</sup> With words like these Barth rejected the synthesis of Christianity with European culture and philosophy, a synthesis which he thought went back at least as far as Friedrich Schleiermacher<sup>4</sup> and which, he claimed, led to the religious endorsement of

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated from the sixth edition by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 75.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) is usually described as the "Father of Liberal Theology." He is known for saying that religion is a feeling of absolute dependence; in this way, historic Christian truth claims coming from the Bible and articulated in the creeds were seen as unimportant. In contrast with Schleiermacher, I believe it is crucial for believers to understand that the Christian faith has truth claims at its core.

nationalism and militarism.<sup>5</sup> Barth was not so much addressing a single or particular theological issue as much as calling into question a whole pattern of the relation of the Christian faith to western culture, a pattern often called “Culture Protestantism.”<sup>6</sup> This pattern reduced Christianity to being the religious component or dimension of the best in the West in such a manner that Christian beliefs were interpreted, evaluated, and accepted in light of or on the basis of ideas coming from western culture. Barth’s comments on the thought of Schleiermacher typify his assessment of the whole cultural tradition. According to Schleiermacher, he writes, “The most authentic work of Christianity is making culture the triumph of the Spirit over nature, while being a Christian is the peak of a fully cultured consciousness. The kingdom of God, according to Schleiermacher, is totally and completely identical with the progress of culture.”<sup>7</sup> Further, for Schleiermacher, according to Barth, the “existence of churches is really an ‘element that is necessary for the development of the human spirit.’”<sup>8</sup> Barth shows his own concerns when, in dialog with Schleiermacher, he suggests that real theologians “should seek the secret of Christianity beyond all culture.”<sup>9</sup> Barth’s witness is that God stands over against even the best in human culture as both the Judge and Redeemer.

A crucial part of this subordination of Christianity to the best in European culture, claimed Barth, was the doctrine of general revelation and the associated natural theology, the

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<sup>5</sup> See Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices: The Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 18-44; and Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church’s Confession Under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962); Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians Under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985); and “The Social Philosophy of Karl Barth” by Will Herberg in *Community, State and Church: Three Essays by Karl Barth* edited by Will Herberg (New York: Anchor Books, 1960).

<sup>6</sup> On the general topic of Culture Protestantism see C. J. Curtis, *Contemporary Protestant Thought* (New York: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 97-103. In North America the term “theological liberalism” was often used as a synonym Culture Protestantism in Europe.

<sup>7</sup> “Kultur als Triumph des Geistes ueber die Natur ist das eigenste Werk des Christentums, wie Christlichkeit ihrerseits die Spitze eines durchkultivierten Bewusstseins ist. Das Reich Gottes ist nach Schleiermacher mit dem Fortschritt der Kultur schlechterdings und eindeutig identisch.” Karl Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946), p. 388.

<sup>8</sup> “Das Bestehen von Kirchen überhaupt ‘ein fuer die Entwicklung des menschlichen Geistes notwendiges Element.’” Ibid. p. 396.

<sup>9</sup> “das Geheimnis des Christentums noch jenseits von aller Kulture suchen wollten.” Ibid. p. 388.

many attempts to prove the existence of God on the basis of reason alone. Though Barth had been speaking out against natural theology for some time before the rise of National Socialism, Hitler's rise to power and the amount of religious support for Hitler brought the issue to a head. "The question became a burning one at the moment when the Evangelical Church in Germany was unambiguously and consistently confronted by a definite and new form of natural theology, namely, by the demand to recognise in the political events of the year 1933, and especially in the form of the God-sent Adolf Hitler, a source of specific new revelation of God, which, demanding obedience and trust, took its place beside the revelation attested in Holy Scripture, claiming it should be acknowledged by Christian proclamation and theology as equally binding and obligatory." This would lead to "the transformation of the Christian Church into the temple of the German nature-and-history-myth."<sup>10</sup>

Barth did not want the immediate crisis of National Socialism to blind Christians to the broader problem of which the church's endorsement of Hitler was, in his opinion, merely a particular manifestation. "The same had already been the case in the developments of the preceding centuries. There can be no doubt that not merely a part but the whole had been intended and claimed when it had been demanded that side by side with its attestation in Jesus Christ and therefore in Holy Scripture the Church should also recognise and proclaim God's revelation in reason, in conscience, in the emotions, in history, in nature and in culture and its achievements and developments."<sup>11</sup> And Barth adds, "If it was admissible and right and perhaps even orthodox to combine the knowability of God in Jesus Christ with His knowability in nature, reason and history, the proclamation of the Gospel with all kinds of other proclamations . . . it is hard to see why the German Church should not be allowed to make its own particular use of the procedure."<sup>12</sup>

That is why Barth saw the Barmen Confession (May 31, 1934), of which he was the principle author, as not only a response to the particular problem of the German Christian

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<sup>10</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: A Selection*, Selected with an introduction by Helmut Gollwitzer. Translated and edited by G. W. Bromiley. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 55. The selection is from CD II,1.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. On this topic see the excellent treatment in Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), pp. 115-134.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 57.

movement that supported Hitler but also as an attempt to purify the entire evangelical church of the problem of natural theology. One must read the Barmen Confession as a rejection of natural revelation, natural theology, and a natural law understanding of ethics, which were interpreted as leading to the subordination of Christianity to the best or worst of European culture, when it claims, “Jesus Christ, as He is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, whom we have to hear and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We condemn the false doctrine that the Church can and must recognise as God’s revelation other events and powers, forms and truth, apart from and alongside this one Word of God.”<sup>13</sup>

In contrast with any approach that claims to encounter God through natural theology, natural revelation, natural law, or National Socialism, Barth proclaimed that God is known only through his Word, which means only through Christ. Any other approach, he claimed, reduced the Christian faith to a mere religious dimension of western culture.

Barth’s approach may be illustrated by his discussion of the traditional Protestant topic of the relation between law and gospel. He thought that sinful humans were very inclined to give the rank and title “law of God” to some demand that does not come from God at all (To repeat, Barth regarded the terrible problem of applying the designation “law of God” to the demands coming from the Nazi movement as representative of a recurring problem.) That is why he strongly recommended changing the traditional phrase “law and gospel” to “gospel and law.” “Anyone who really and earnestly would first say Law and only then, presupposing this, say Gospel would not, no matter how good his intention, be speaking of the Law of *God* and therefore then certainly not *his* Gospel.”<sup>14</sup> The order “law and gospel.” used by Protestants since the Reformation, assumed that there was a revelation of God’s law that came through creation which had an impact on human life before people believe the gospel.<sup>15</sup> But this order, Barth thought, left one in danger of giving the title “law of God” to demands that came from the

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<sup>13</sup> This is the first article of the Barmen Confession as quoted by Barth, *Ibid.* p. 54. The entire text of the Barmen Confession appears in Cochrane, *op cit.* As far as I know, this is the only major Protestant confession that directly denies that God is revealing himself through his creation, though God’s general revelation is not discussed at length in some other Protestant confessions.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Barth, “Gospel and Law,” as found in *Community, State and Church: Three Essays by Karl Barth* edited and with an introduction by Will Herberg, (New York: Anchor Books, 1960), p. 71.

<sup>15</sup> See Hans O. Tiefel, “The Ethics of Gospel and Law: Aspects of the Barth-Luther Debate.” Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1967.

German people or from the Führer or any other source than the God and Father of Jesus Christ. To avoid such a travesty, he said, “Gospel and Law,” to emphasize that we only know for sure that a law is from God if it follows the gospel. And when he says, “the Law is in the Gospel, from the Gospel and points to the Gospel,” it is to make sure everyone knows that “we must first of all know about the Gospel in order to know about the Law, and not vice versa.”<sup>16</sup>

To conclude Barth’s critique of natural theology/natural law thinking, we should notice one final point. Barth claimed that natural-law thinking robbed people of courage when they had to face and confront evil. “All arguments based on natural law are Janus-headed. They do not lead to the light of clear decisions, but to misty twilight in which all cats become gray. They lead to—Munich.”<sup>17</sup> Barth’s great courage in resisting the Nazis, as he saw it, arose from his starting point in hearing the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He thought any other basis for ethics, whether natural law or any other method, led to moral compromise.

## 2. Helmut Thielicke (1908-1986)

Helmut Thielicke’s rejection of natural law broadly follows Karl Barth, who was one of Thielicke’s first theology professors in Bonn in the early thirties. (Thielicke was also involved in the anti-Nazi movement among Protestant Christians in Germany during World War II.) Nevertheless, Thielicke added a number of considerations that are worthy of separate discussion. Starting with his biblical exegesis, whereas traditionally Protestants had associated the Ten Commandments with the natural moral law, Thielicke associated the Ten Commandments with “natural lawlessness.”<sup>18</sup> Noting the negative structure of most of the commandments (“Thou

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<sup>16</sup> Barth, “Gospel and Law,” p. 72. I have responded to Barth’s views on law and gospel in “Law and Gospel: The Hermeneutical/Homiletical Key to Reformation Theology and Ethics,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, vol. 36, no 2, April 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Barth as quoted in Herberg, ed. p. 49. The reference to “Munich” is to the Munich Agreement of 1938 in which France and Britain permitted the Nazi takeover of the part of Czechoslovakia called the “Sudentenland.” It became a watchword for the futile appeasement of totalitarianism.

<sup>18</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics: Volume 1: Foundations*, edited and translated by William H. Lazareth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint edition, 1984; copyright Fortress Press, 1966), p. 444. The material about Thielicke is broadly dependent on Thomas K. Johnson, “Helmut Thielicke’s Ethics of Law and Gospel,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1987. As an example of the traditional Protestant view, John Calvin claimed natural law, “which we have above described as written, even engraved, upon the hearts of all, in a sense asserts the very same things that are to be learned from the two Tables.” *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T.

shalt not . . .”), he claims, “There is within this negativity a protest against man as he actually is.”<sup>19</sup> This is the opposite, he claimed, of the assumptions that inform natural law theories. “The order of being presupposed in all conceptions of natural law can be assumed only on the presupposition that the fall has only a comparatively accidental but not an essential significance.”<sup>20</sup> “Natural law and the Decalogue in fact belong to completely different worlds.”<sup>21</sup> Rather than connecting with a natural law within human nature, Thieliicke claimed, the Ten Commandments harshly confront and condemn our natural lawlessness.

This relates closely to the problems Thieliicke saw within Culture Protestantism. Whereas “The Decalogue is expressly set down within the context of a dialogue”<sup>22</sup> meaning a dialogue with God in personal faith, natural law and Culture Protestant ethics, he claimed, conceive of moral decisions as being made by solitary egos, seeing God as merely the distant author of moral laws.

Culture Protestantism makes Christianity into a form of the world (*Weltgestalt*) in the sense that the commands of God—including the command to love one’s neighbor—are detached from the divine *auctor legis* and from the relationship of decision and faith with this author. One could also say that Culture Protestantism tends to separate the second table of the law from the first Commandment (“I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods besides me.”) and then represents the individual commandments as maxims of Christian behavior.<sup>23</sup>

Thieliicke thought that as soon as the commands of God are separated from their source, they undergo a change of meaning that leaves them significantly different from what they were intended to be. Specifically, biblical moral prescriptions are easily subjected to ideological perversion once they are separated from God. For example, Thieliicke thought the maxim

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McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), II.vii.1. This same connection of God’s natural moral law with the Ten Commandments is present in most of the Protestant Reformers.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p. 441.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 443.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. p. 444.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 442.

<sup>23</sup> Helmut Thieliicke, *Kirche und Öffentlichkeit: Zur Grundlegung einer lutherischen Kulturethik* (Tuebingen: Furche Verlag, 1947), p. 44.

“Gemeinnutz geht vor Eigennutz” (“The interests of the group come before the interests of the individual.”) is a possibly legitimate application of the biblical love command. But it was used by the Nazis to support their program that was initially called “Christianity of Action” and was later called “Socialism of Action,” so that the application of a proper biblical principle was controlled and misdirected by a terrible ideology. Thieliicke also saw in the early works of Karl Marx a secularized form of expression of Christian love, but once this love command was separated from its Source and integrated into the system of historical materialism, the meaning of the command was substantially changed.<sup>24</sup> Any moral theory that allows any independence of a moral command from God risks serious ideological perversion. “Only the one who stands in personal contact with the Lord of the First Commandment, as one who has been called and who follows, recognizes that the commands of God are something ‘wholly other.’”<sup>25</sup>

Thieliicke not only took this new direction in interpreting the Ten Commandments; he also took a new direction in interpreting the Sermon on the Mount that corresponds with his rejection of natural law ethics.

The harsh and apparently alien aspect of the Sermon on the Mount is its true point. It makes its demands with no regard for constitutional factors such as the impulses or for the limitations imposed on my personal will by autonomous structures. . . . It does not claim me merely in a sphere of personal freedom. It thus compels me to identify myself with my total I. Hence I have to see in the world, not merely the creation of God, but also the structural form of human sin, i.e., its suprapersonal form, the “fallen” world. . . . I have to confess that I myself have fallen, and that what I see out there is the structural objectification of my fall.<sup>26</sup>

Whereas Culture Protestants, natural law theorists, and “German Christians” generally saw societal structures as the result of creation, perhaps calling them “creation orders,” Thieliicke saw them as resulting from the Fall. Other views, he claimed, resulted from minimizing the total

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<sup>24</sup> Helmut Thieliicke, *Vernunft und Existenz bei Lessing: Das Unbedingte in der Geschichte* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), p. 49.

<sup>25</sup> *Kulturethik*, pp. 45,46.

<sup>26</sup> Helmut Thieliicke, *The Evangelical Faith: Volume Two: The Doctrine of God and of Christ*, translated and edited by Goeffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 248.



demand of God encountered in the Sermon on the Mount and left people without a complete sense of responsibility for all their actions.

This also corresponds with Thielicke's discussion of the problem of "autonomous norms" (*Eigengesetzlichkeit* in German). To appreciate Thielicke's comments one must keep in mind Barth's concern that people tend to call a law "the law of God" or otherwise grant moral authority to a norm that it absolutely should not have.

Since Kant the fact is known and deeply rooted in our thinking that the individual spheres of life are endowed with their autonomous norms (*Eigengesetzlichkeit*). He imputed this autonomous structure principally to the spheres of meaning (*Sinngebiete*) of the ethical, the esthetical and the theoretical. More recently one has learned to reckon with the autonomy of all the historical spheres of life; one knows of the autonomy of the state, of economic life, of law and of politics. One grants each of these historical spheres an autonomous structure because it is endowed with a constituting principle, from which all its proper functions can be derived.<sup>27</sup>

Because people think there are "immanent principles which so control the processes involved as to make them proceed automatically,"<sup>28</sup> people tend to say business is business, art is art, politics is politics. People talk and act as if there is some kind of natural law or law of nature in each sphere of society that has its own validity and authority regardless of any moral principles or ethical rules. But rather than falsely seeing these autonomous norms, whether in business, art, politics, or another sphere of life as coming from God, Thielicke sees these norms as the expression of our fallenness. They are structural expressions of sin, not creation orders in which we encounter a God-given natural moral law.<sup>29</sup> And if one of these immanent principles or

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<sup>27</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Geschichte und Existenz: Grundlegung einer evangelischen Geschichtstheologie* (Gütersloh: Verlag C. Bertelsmann, 1935), p. 46.

<sup>28</sup> TE, 2, p. 71.

<sup>29</sup> Here Thielicke was especially thinking of the problem that some of the Nazi-oriented "German Christians" said that the law of God comes through the Nazi "Volk" as a creation order, so that the law of the Nazi Volk can be called the law of God.

autonomous norms is absolutized, turned into an idol, the great secular ideologies like National Socialism or Communism tend to arise.<sup>30</sup>

Thielicke claimed that all natural law theories of ethics made two crucial assumptions: 1. There is a perceptible order of being or structure of the world that can be traced back to creation. 2. Human reason is largely untouched by sin so that this moral order can be perceived by all people.<sup>31</sup> From the preceding discussion it should be clear that Thielicke did not think the current structure of our world could be traced back to creation. In addition it should be noted that Thielicke claimed human reason is not able to discern the good without revelation. Human reason is so distorted by sin that it is the expression of human fallenness and therefore unable to ethically evaluate fallen humanity.<sup>32</sup>

Thielicke thought that Protestant ethics needed to go through a process of purification similar to the purification of Protestant theology that occurred during the Reformation. This means purifying Protestant ethics of any notion of natural law as an analogy to purifying Protestant theology of salvation by works. “Man’s incapacity to justify himself by good works is logically to be augmented by, or integrated with, a similar incapacity truly to know the will and commandment of God.”<sup>33</sup> All Protestant ethics should be only an ethics of justification by faith alone. This leaves no place at all for any notion of natural law or an ethics of general revelation.

### 3. H. Evan Runner (1916-2002)

H. Evan Runner was a North American follower of the “Philosophy of the Cosmomic Idea,” crafted by the Dutch Protestant thinker Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977). While this movement was not under direct influence from Barth or Thielicke, it has important similarities. Like Barth, the followers of Dooyeweerd are generally very critical of the medieval synthesis of

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<sup>30</sup> TE, 2, p. 72. There is a very similar discussion of the topic of autonomous norms in the work of the Danish thinker N. H. Soe. See his *Christliche Ethik* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1957). The similarity of the two discussions by two thinkers who were both deeply influenced by Karl Barth suggests that this type of assessment of societal structures flows from the basic lines of Barth’s theology.

<sup>31</sup> TE, 1, p. 388.

<sup>32</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Theologische Ethik*, Band II,1: *Entfaltung* 1. Teil: *Mensch und Welt* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1955), pp. 371-383. Unfortunately his “Theological Critique of Reason” does not appear in the English edition.

<sup>33</sup> TE 1, p. 326. What Thielicke says on this topic can be seen as a development of related themes in Barth’s writings. See Barth, “No!” in *Natural Theology*, p. 97.

the biblical and classical traditions, thinking this synthesis led to the secularization of Europe and North America. And like Barth, this movement is very critical of any synthesis of Christian beliefs with Enlightenment or post-Enlightenment European culture.

In a speech delivered in 1957 in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, Runner argued vehemently that modern Christians should completely reject natural law theory.<sup>34</sup> Runner thought we should trace the origins of modern natural law theory to the deist philosophy of Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583-1648), especially seen in his book *De Veritate* (1624). In an age of raging conflict that was devastating Europe (the Thirty Years War, 1618-1648), Herbert advocated a “universal” religion and a “universal” law that could overcome the conflicts between men. Obviously this deprives Christianity of distinctiveness, which Runner thought is clearly wrong.

Just a year later came Hugo Grotius’s *De Jure belli et pacis* (1625). According to Runner’s interpretation, Grotius sharply distinguishes the Law of God from the Law of Nature. And though Grotius believed in the Law of God, he thought the foundation of public life in Europe should be the Law of Nature, not the Law of God. These ideas were further developed a generation later by Samuel Pufendorf, who also sharply distinguished the plane of divine revelation from the plane of natural law. And thus, argues Runner, a whole new outlook developed that was contrary to the Reformation faith. Man is no longer seen as a covenantal being whose meaning is found in relation to God. Man is now seen as a rational-moral being who has within himself a proper guide to life and the ability to act according to this guide. Though “Such men did not hesitate to leave Revelation and the Kingdom of Christ to the private lives of those who showed some concern for these matters,” yet “These were the men who took up with unflinching confidence the building of the Kingdom of Man on Earth. Communism is one form of the general pattern.”<sup>35</sup>

In this way Runner thinks the medieval dualistic scheme of Nature/Grace came back into Protestant lands with disastrous results. The medieval synthesis, he thinks, was really an attempt to hold on to pagan philosophy in the realm of Nature while adding Christian beliefs in the

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<sup>34</sup> “The Development of Calvinism in North America on the Background of Its Development in Europe.” As far as I know, this valuable lecture was never published. Its importance is shown by its presence in an informal format in various libraries. Illness may have prevented Runner from completing the project.

<sup>35</sup> Runner, p. 8.

restricted realm of Grace or Supernature. Runner and the other thinkers in his movement are critical of the Protestant Reformers for not more completely replacing the medieval Nature/Grace framework with what they would regard as a more authentic evangelical philosophy. As he reads Christian history, because the Reformers failed in this important task, the Nature/Grace framework came back into Protestant thought and culture shortly after the Reformation. The theology of Phillip Melanchthon (1497-1560, colleague of Martin Luther at the University of Wittenberg) already shows terrible signs of this trend. The Nature/Grace framework of thought made Revelation and the Christian faith irrelevant to the important areas of law, politics, and business, in this way contributing to the secularization of western culture. Natural law theories, whether Protestant or Catholic, are an important part of Nature/Grace dualism. Therefore, argues Runner, Reformed Christians should reject any theory of natural law as part of rejecting Nature/Grace dualism and secularization.

#### 4. Responses

Coming from Barth, Thieliicke, and Runner, we encounter three very serious types of reasons for rejecting general revelation and especially the natural moral law as standard and important themes in Protestant theology and ethics. For Barth, consideration of the natural moral law and general revelation is part of the natural theology that reduced the Christian faith to the religious dimension of western culture and lost sight of the otherness of God; natural theology was part of the distinctive religious-cultural synthesis of Culture Protestantism in which ideas from the secular Enlightenment overruled truly Christian convictions so that Christians and the church were not able to stand against society as prophetic critics. Following Barth's claim that theological theories about general revelation and the natural moral law are part of subordinating the Christian faith to secular culture, Thieliicke claims that human life is largely structured by sin, and human reason is so heavily shaped by sin that reason cannot derive any reliable moral norms from the structure of human life. In a slightly different line, Runner rejects any supposedly Christian theory of a natural moral law because it is a part of the Nature/Grace dualism that contributed to the destructive secularization of western civilization.

The rejection of any theory of the natural moral law, often joined with a minimized understanding of the role of God's general revelation in human life and culture, has several

negative effects on the pattern of life within the Christian church and on our overall understanding of the mission God has given to the church. It can blind us to the way in which our neighbors are already wrestling with God and are in conflict with God. We may miss the way in which the biblical message addresses the primordial Ängste and deepest questions which our neighbors face. It leaves the impression that our non-Christian neighbors can have no knowledge of right and wrong, unless that knowledge is derived from Christ or the Bible. And it can point our eyes (and our unbelieving neighbors' eyes) away from seeing God's active role in maintaining his creation (common grace) by means of his continuing word in creation (general revelation), which together set the conditions for God's call to repent and believe the gospel. This weakened set of theological/philosophical convictions can easily distort the relation to society and culture of individual Christians and the entire church community. Rather than understanding and embracing the way in which God has sent the entire church (and every member of the church) into society as carriers of the gospel of peace with God, a denial of God's general revelation and natural moral law pushes Christians toward a fight-or-flight relation to society. If we think that God is not already active in our world in his general revelation and common grace, we often end up with either an "ethics of holy community," the flight relation to society which assumes we can and must purify ourselves from sin by limited contact with the world, or an "ethics of domination," the fight relation to society which assumes we must impose God's law on our neighbors because they know nothing about right and wrong, thereby initiating their conflict with God. Both moral/religious stances toward society hinder proper missions and result from a minimized understanding or denial of God's general revelation.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> In other places I have described a more holistic understanding of the relation between faith and culture. I believe that the proper concerns represented by the "ethics of holy community" can better be described under the motive of the "construction" of new cultural forms within the Christian community, while the proper concerns represented by the "ethics of domination," can better be described under the motive of the "contribution" of cultural entities from the Christian community to our various cultures. The motives of cultural construction and contributions to culture should be completed by the motives of the prophetic critique of cultures and the correlation of the gospel with the questions and Ängste present in a culture. For more, see Thomas K. Johnson, "Christ and Culture," *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 35:1, January, 2011.

Though our studies in Romans 1:18-2:5 are already a response to Barth, Thielicke, and Runner and were written in light of their concerns, some additional comments are in order. Obviously, as evangelical Christians our first priority is to discover how a theme is presented in the Bible, following which we must evaluate theological and philosophical theories in light of biblical teaching. It is completely clear that the apostle Paul preached the gospel of Christ in light of God's previous word through creation and that Paul's teaching fits organically with similar themes in the rest of the Bible.

In response to Evan Runner: it seems to me that the type of classical Christian natural law theories one sees in Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin is substantially different from the early Enlightenment theories found in Grotius and Pufendorf. It seems very likely that Grotius and Pufendorf put natural law theory within a dualistic (therefore secularizing) framework, but that Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin used natural law theory without this dualism, even if a limited grace/nature dualism may be seen in some of the writings of Aquinas. I believe that classical Protestant natural law theories as seen in Luther and Calvin formed an organic part of their doctrines of creation and general revelation that tend to overcome dualistic tendencies within the Christian community. And what the apostle Paul said about God's general revelation and natural moral law was part of his missionary response to his situation that was alternately secular or filled with a vast array of different religions.

In response to Helmut Thielicke: The understanding of the natural moral law which I have learned from Paul's epistle to the Romans does not assume that reason is sinless but rather that the general revelation of God's moral law is the key element that makes moral reason and civilization itself possible, even when our moral reason may be defending itself against God's demand. God's natural moral law and general revelation stand in constant tension with human natural (natural in the sense of coming from sin, not natural in the sense of resulting from creation) lawlessness. And what we see in Romans suggests that the structural expression of sin assumes a deeper structure of life given in creation (and a general revelation of that creation order) that still exists, even if sin means it exists in a distorted manner. And did not Thielicke assume, contrary to his own claims, that the confrontation of our natural lawlessness by the law

of God in Scripture is possible because people have a previously given (perhaps vague) idea that murder, stealing, and lying are wrong?

In response to Karl Barth's courageous confrontation of the moral and theological weakness of Culture Protestantism, some questions must also be raised. Is it possible that Barth's grasp of the otherness of God and the need for revelation from on high could be better served by a different kind of critique of his religious/cultural situation? Could one not better use a transcendental critique of unbelief (which assumes God's active and ongoing general revelation) and an analysis of the wrath of God such as offered in the earlier chapters of this book? My critique of Culture Protestantism would be different from Barth's critique.

I believe that a continual synthesis of Christianity with philosophy and culture is not only a human necessity, based on the need of the intellectually mature and authentic Christian to overcome spiritual schizophrenia and have a unified faith and worldview. A synthesis of our Christian faith with culture and learning is also highly desirable because we should want to worship God with the entirety of our lives. And a significant interaction between our Christian truth claims and the truth claims of a culture or cultures becomes an obvious need as soon as we take up the missionary calling God has given to the church. But the crucial question faced by Christians in all ages and cultures is the role of our Christian truth claims in relation to the role of the ideas and values from our cultures in our total religious-cultural synthesis or worldview. (My analysis of this problem is dependent on Helmut Thielicke's methodological contrast of "Cartesian Theology" with "Non-Cartesian Theology" to show the problems of Culture Protestantism and similar movements,<sup>37</sup> as well as on H. Richard Niebuhr's terminology "Christ of Culture,"<sup>38</sup> which is also addressing this problem.) Phrased in ideal terms, there are two primary intellectual alternatives faced by each individual Christian and by every Christian community: either our central Christian beliefs function as control beliefs and cognitive filters that determine which of the beliefs and values from our cultures we accept, *or*, the beliefs and values of our cultures serve as control beliefs and cognitive filters that determine which Christian

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<sup>37</sup> See Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith: Vol. 1: Prolegomena: The Relation of Theology to Modern Thought Forms*, translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1974), 420 pages.

<sup>38</sup> See H. Richard Niebuhr's classic analysis in *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 259 pages.

beliefs we accept and how we interpret them. In generalized terms and recognizing the complexity of the movement, Culture Protestantism evaluated, appropriated, and interpreted the Christian faith using the control beliefs and cognitive filters provided by the European Enlightenment and the following rationalist and romantic movements. As a result, important themes in Christian theology and ethics were filtered out, meaning they were not mentioned or not believed. What should have been occurring in the churches is that pastors and individual Christians would be evaluating and selectively accepting or rejecting the ideas and values of the Enlightenment (and the following cultural movements) on the basis of and in light of central Christian convictions such as have been summarized in the Christian creeds. (I am thinking especially of the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed.) Overall, Culture Protestantism neglected or denied the holiness and wrath of God, the universal validity and objectivity of God's moral law, and the depths of human sin, with a result that the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection were not seen as extremely important. To emphasize one point, most of the leading theologians of the entire Culture Protestant movement denied an objective or absolute moral law coming from God, regardless of whether God communicated this moral law through creation (as the natural moral law) or through Scripture (as biblical ethics), because their previously accepted control beliefs arising from Enlightenment philosophy filtered out belief in an objective moral law. Core Christian convictions, both about the moral law and about the gospel, were filtered out because pastors, theologians, and church members were evaluating and appropriating the biblical message using the ideas and values of the Enlightenment. If these Christians had used the opposite method, the religious and cultural results would have been quite different; perhaps the humanitarian disasters of World War II and the Holocaust could have been prevented.<sup>39</sup>

Karl Barth and Helmut Thielicke were surely right to reject the total theological/cultural worldview of Culture Protestantism. Evan Runner was surely right to reject the views regarding the natural moral law that contributed to the secular Enlightenment in the seventeenth and

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<sup>39</sup> This "opposite method" of evaluating the ideas and values of our multiple cultures in light of our core Christian convictions always involves multiple steps which I have described as the multiple proper interactions between the Christian faith and culture. There were multiple valuable convictions and intellectual apprehensions which came to light in Enlightenment thought which Christians can accept if they are accepted through the filter of orthodox Christian beliefs.



eighteenth centuries. But rather than Christians rejecting the themes of God's general revelation and his natural moral law from our theology and ethics, we should see that all of unbelieving life, thought, and culture is involved in suppressing the unavoidable knowledge from God and about God which God is proclaiming through his creation. Then we will be more equipped to also proclaim the gospel of God which is revealed in Scripture.

### **Appendix III: Types of Beliefs**

In this book I have made reference to different types of beliefs that people hold, using terms such as “professed beliefs,” “practiced beliefs,” and “control beliefs.” These distinctions merit further comment. As I am using these terms, they refer to the different roles and functions a belief can have within the human mind, assuming there is such an entity as a cognitive structure or a blueprint of the human mind. The way I am using these terms may be different from how these terms are used in some branches of psychology and philosophy.

I use the term “professed beliefs” to refer to all the ideas and convictions that a person is conscious of believing and about which this person is able to say, “I believe . . .” or “I am convinced of . . .” These professed beliefs may be either rather trivial (e.g., The lamp on my desk is on right now.) or truly profound (e.g., I believe that God is Triune.).

I use the term “practiced beliefs” to refer to all the ideas and convictions that shape a person's behavior, whether or not the person is conscious that a belief is playing this role in life. A practiced belief may stand in conflict with a professed belief. For example, a person may deny being a racist or even deny that the word “race” refers to any definable entity (my point of view) but then treat people with a different skin tone as superior or inferior. Or, as mentioned in a previous chapter of this book, a person may claim to be a moral relativist and then go on to make good use of God's natural moral law. The truths that all people know as a result of God's general revelation (but often suppress from consciousness) are often practiced, perhaps in a negative manner, while not being professed. We can also refer to these truths known via God's general revelation, even if denied, as the “transcendental conditions of human experience.”

I use the terms “control beliefs” and “filter beliefs” synonymously to refer to those beliefs that play an authoritative role in a person’s mind either to rule in or to rule out other professed beliefs. Control beliefs play a role in the human mind that is similar to the role of a referee in a sporting event. For example, for many university students I have taught, atheistic evolutionary theory has played the role of a control belief or filter belief. As a result of this control belief, they have not been able to profess to believe in an objective moral law and have had great difficulty explaining what makes humans different from animals; atheistic evolutionary theory has filtered out professing belief in truths that they have known as a result of God’s general revelation, pushing these generally revealed truths into a suppressed status in their minds. As a referee in the mind, atheistic evolutionary theory says a person may not admit to believing there is an absolute moral law.

It is my personal observation (and not much more) that such control or filter beliefs usually address three types of themes: what really and ultimately exists; how we should interpret our experiences of guilt, shame, and forgiveness; and what is the big story of history. Therefore, very generally, worldviews and religions have three intellectual structures (which function as control beliefs or cognitive filters), thereby shaping all that people believe: an ontological structure, which describes what ultimately exists; an existential structure, which describes our experiences of guilt, duty, and forgiveness; and a historical structure, which describes the flow of history. As Christians we also have three intellectual structures that outline our entire faith and philosophy of life. Our Christian ontological structure is oriented around our doctrine of the Trinity; our existential structure or control belief is oriented around the relation between law and gospel; and our historical structure is the biblical meta-story of creation, fall, redemption, and final restoration. We should consciously use these core Christian convictions as our control beliefs and cognitive filters. Part of the authenticity and holism of being a Christian is that my professed beliefs, my practiced beliefs, and my filter beliefs can be completely unified and reconciled when I recite the Apostle’s Creed or the Nicene Creed in worship of God along with fellow Christians.