

IN RESPONSE - THE LIGHT OF NATURE

by Dennis Prutow

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Toward the conclusion of the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas and company visited the Galatian community of Lystra. There, by the grace of God, Paul healed a man lame from birth. The community rushed upon the pair to worship them. Aghast, Paul plunged headlong into the crowd and directed attention to the Creator.

Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.... He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness (Acts 14:16 & 17).

It was foolish for the people of Lystra to worship Paul and Barnabas as gods. The true and living God *did not leave Himself without witness* in this world.

A witness gives testimony in court as to the truth or veracity of a matter under discussion. Here, the witness is to the very existence of God. There are those who maintain the witness of God's existence in and through creation is muted and hidden. It is certainly unclear.

I have heard Dr. R. C. Sproul ask a simple question to graduate students, "Is God's revelation of Himself in creation infallible?" Is general revelation infallible? We demur. Dr. Sproul asks a second question. "Is special revelation infallible?" Is the revelation of God in Scripture infallible? Our countenances brighten. Of course Scripture is infallible and inerrant. Dr. Sproul then asks, "How can God's revelation of Himself be anything but infallible?" He comments further, "The problem is not with God's revelation. The problem is with the receivers." We ought not to impugn the validity or veracity of God's revelation on the basis of our weaknesses. The Bible says of God, "He did not leave Himself without witness." Does God give false witness concerning Himself in creation? Of course He doesn't. To ask the question is to answer it.

Paul goes on to say this witness includes God doing good. And Paul describes the good God does. Literally the text reads, "giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling your hearts with food and gladness."

We recall Jesus enjoins His disciples to be good to all, to love the enemy and to pray for the persecutor. "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:44-45). God's benevolence in rain and sunshine extends to all humanity.

God insures the seasons come and go. The cycle remains unbroken. God's providence is sure. As rain comes and sunshine warms the earth, wheat, corn, and milo grow and flourish. With food comes gladness. God gives a certain joy of heart to all people everywhere through His providential care of them. So it is that Paul speaks of creation and providence bearing witness to the existence of God.

Notice too that Paul does not simply lay an abstract principle before the people of Lystra. God did not leave Himself without witness. He gave *you* rains from heaven and fruitful seasons. He filled *your* hearts with food and gladness. The interaction is between God and *you*. God has born witness of His presence to *you*. The witness is God's hand in creation and providence.

The Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger Catechism each refer to this witness of God to Himself as "the light of nature." There are ten places in the Confession and Catechism where the Westminster Divines use this term.

For example, Larger Catechism Question and Answer 2. Question: "How doth it appear that there is a God?" Answer: "The very light of nature in man, and the works of God, declare plainly that there is a God; but his word and Spirit only, do sufficiently and effectually reveal him unto men for their salvation." The Westminster Confession begins, "Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest

the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men inexcusable...." The proof texts include Romans 1:19-20 and Romans 2:14-15.

We may understand the term, light of nature, as follows. The *light* is light from God. We speak of the Bible as giving us light. "Your word is a lamp to my feet And a light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). "For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light" (Proverbs 6:23). In a similar way, God gives light in and through the created order, including the minds and consciences of men and women. *Nature*, as understood by the Westminster Divines, is this created order. Nature is not something above or beyond God taking on a persona of its own. Nature *is* creation. The light of nature is simply the light God gives as He reveals Himself through creation.

We speak of artists and craftsmen leaving their signature on their work. We know the work of Monet immediately. We identify the painting style; it is a signature identifying the artist. A member of our congregation is a welder. He tells me he can identify who fabricated a piece of heavy equipment by looking at the welds. Every welder leaves his signature in his work. Several years ago someone tried to be kind to our injured cat. We went to the vet to have stitches removed. Did the vet pick up our cat and give him this help. The nurse took one look and exclaimed, "Those aren't doc's stitches." She knew her vet's signature. The same is true of creation. God's fingerprints are all over and within His handiwork. His signature, His witness, is present. This is the witness to which Paul refers in Acts 14:17.

How clear is this light of nature? What does the Bible say? Romans 1:20, "Since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse."

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IN RESPONSE - THE LIGHT OF NATURE, MURRAY & VAN TIL

by Dennis Prutow

What does Romans 1:20 teach? "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." The light of nature shows God exists.

The venerable John Murray confirms this with comments on Romans 1:20,

We must not tone down the teaching of the apostle in this passage. It is a clear declaration to the effect that the visible creation of God's handiwork makes manifest the invisible perfections of God as its Creator, that the things which are perceptible from to the senses cognition of these invisible perfections is derived, and that thus a clear apprehension of God's perfections may be gained from his observable handiwork. Phenomena disclose the noumena of God's transcendent perfection and specific divinity.¹

Murray observes, "We must not tone down the teaching of the apostle in this passage." But efforts are made to tone down the teaching of the apostle. We tie together the concepts of *natural theology* and the *light of nature* in the Confession. Cornelius Van Til says, "The distinctive character of the natural theology of the Westminster Confession may be most clearly brought to view if we show how intimately it is interwoven with the Confession's doctrine of Scripture."²

The light of grace outshines in its brilliance the light of nature as the sun outshines the moon. The kind of God that speaks in Scripture can speak only on his own authority. So the authority of Scripture is as basic as its necessity.

To this necessity and authority there must be added the sufficiency or finality of Scripture. When the sun of grace has arisen on the horizon of the sinner, the "light of nature" shines only by reflected light. Even when

there are some "circumstances concerning the worship of God, the government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence," they are to be so ordered "according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed." The light of Scripture is that superior light which lightens every other light."³

Van Til goes on to discuss this connection between Scripture and the light of nature.

With this general view of Scripture in mind, we turn to the question of God's revelation of himself in nature. The first point that calls for reflection here is the fact that it is, according to Scripture itself, the same God who reveals himself in nature....

Contemplation of this fact seems at once to plunge us into great difficulty. Are we not told that nature reveals nothing of the grace of God? Does not the Confession insist that men cannot be saved except through the knowledge of God, "be they ever so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature; and the law of that religion they do profess"? Saving grace is not manifest in nature; yet it is the God of saving grace who manifests himself by means of nature. How can these two be harmonized?

The answer to this problem must be found in the fact that God is "eternal, incomprehensible, most free, most absolute." Any revelation that God gives of himself is therefore absolutely voluntary. Herein precisely lies the union of the various forms or God's revelation with one another. God's revelation in nature, together with God's revelation in Scripture, form God's one grand scheme of covenant revelation of himself to man. The two forms of revelation must therefore be seen as presupposing and supplementing one another.⁴

The revelation of God in Scripture and the revelation of God in nature must stand

together. Scripture is the sun. Nature is the moon. The former gives light to the latter. The latter gives no light without the former. This seems to be a toning down of the teaching of the apostle.

A. A. Hodge, the son of Charles, wrote a commentary on the Confession. He speaks about *the light of nature*.

The light of nature and the works of creation and providence are sufficient to enable men to ascertain the fact that there is a God, and somewhat of his nature and character, and thus render them inexcusable.

Three generally distinct false opinions have been entertained with respect to the capacity of men, in their present circumstances, to attain to any positive knowledge of the being and character of God.⁵

Hodge outlines Van Til's position. An extreme opinion on this subject has been held by some Christians, to the effect that no true and certain knowledge of God can be derived by man, in his present condition, from the light of nature in the entire absence of a supernatural revelation; that we are altogether dependent upon such a revelation for any certain knowledge that God exists, as well as for all knowledge of his nature and his purposes.

This opinion is disproved—(a.) By the direct testimony of Scripture. Rom. i. 20-24; ii. 14, 15.⁶

Van Til says with regard to the same teaching in Charles Hodge, "My reply has been that we must indeed follow Paul, but not Hodge, on this point. Paul does not teach natural theology in the first chapter of Romans."⁷ Clearly Murray is more in accord with Hodge than with Van Til at this point.

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⁵ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1978), 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷ Cornelius Van Til, "Van Til's Review of His Writings," *The Works of Cornelius Van Til*, E. H. Sigward, ed., CD-ROM Version 1.07 (New York: Labels Army Co.) 1997.

¹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 1:40.

² Cornelius Van Til, *The Infallible Word*, Paul Woolly, ed., (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1967), 264

³ *Ibid.*, 265.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 266-267.

IN RESPONSE - THE LIGHT OF NATURE, MATTHEW HENRY

by Dennis Prutow

The Westminster Standards are Puritan documents. We expect them to set forth the Puritan understanding of the *light of nature*. We can therefore turn to the often quoted Puritan Divine, Matthew Henry, to help us interpret the concept. We look at the idea of the light of nature as found in Romans 1 and 2. We also review the connection between Scripture and the light of nature.

First, Henry avers, "If the Gentiles, who had but the light of nature, were inexcusable (ch. 1:20), much more the Jews, who had the light of the law, the revealed will of God, and so had greater helps than the Gentiles."¹

With regard to Romans 2, The light of nature. This the Gentiles have, and by this they shall be judged: *As many as have sinned without law shall perish without law*; that is, the unbelieving Gentiles, who had no other guide but natural conscience, no other motive but common mercies, and had not the law of Moses nor any supernatural revelation, shall not be reckoned with for the transgression of the law they never had, nor come under the aggravation of the Jews' sin against and judgment by the written law; but they shall be judged by, as they sin against, the law of nature, not only as it is in their hearts, corrupted, defaced, and imprisoned in unrighteousness, but as in the uncorrupt original the Judge keeps by him. Further to clear this (v. 14, 15), in a parenthesis, he evinces that the light of nature was to the Gentiles instead of a written law. He had said (v. 12) they had *sinned without law*, which looks like a contradiction; for where there is no law there is no transgression. But, says he, though they had not the written law (Ps. 147:20), they had that which was equivalent, not to the ceremonial, but to the moral law. They *had the work of the law*. He does not mean that work which the law commands, as if they could produce a perfect obedi-

ence; but that work which the law does. The work of the law is to direct us what to do, and to examine us what we have done. Now, (1.) They had that which directed them what to do by the light of nature: by the force and tendency of their natural notions and dictates they apprehended a clear and vast difference between good and evil. They *did by nature the things contained in the law*. They had a sense of justice and equity, honour and purity, love and charity; the light of nature taught obedience to parents, pity to the miserable, conservation of public peace and order, forbade murder, stealing, lying, perjury, etc. Thus they were a *law unto themselves*. (2.) They had that which examined them as to what they had done: *Their conscience also bearing witness*. They had that within them which approved and commended what was well done and which reproached them for what was done amiss. Conscience is a witness, and first or last will bear witness, though for a time it may be bribed or brow-beaten. It is instead of a thousand witnesses, testifying of that which is most secret; and their *thoughts accusing or excusing*, passing a judgment upon the testimony of conscience by applying the law to the fact. Conscience is that candle of the Lord which was not quite put out, no, not in the Gentile world.²

The light of nature is the revelation of God. Unbelievers have it and act in accord with it or react violently against it. The revelation is unavoidable. Murray and Hodge reflect the position of Henry.

What about the connection between Scripture and the light of nature? Henry makes some interesting observations in his introduction to Job. Job is,

A monument of primitive theology. The first and great principles of the light of nature, on which natural religion is founded, are here, in a warm, and long, and learned dispute, not only taken for granted on all sides and not the least doubt made of them, but by common consent plainly laid down

as eternal truths, illustrated and urged as affecting commanding truths. Were ever the being of God, his glorious attributes and perfections, his unsearchable wisdom, his irresistible power, his inconceivable glory, his inflexible justice, and his incontestable sovereignty, discoursed of with more clearness, fullness, reverence, and divine eloquence, than in this book? The creation of the world, and the government of it, are here admirably described, not as matters of nice speculation, but as laying most powerful obligations upon us to fear and serve, to submit to and trust in, our Creator, owner, Lord, and ruler. Moral good and evil, virtue and vice, were never drawn more to the life (the beauty of the one and the deformity of the other) than in this book; nor the inviolable rule of God's judgment more plainly laid down, *That happy are the righteous, it shall be well with them; and Woe to the wicked, it shall be ill with them*. These are not questions of the schools to keep the learned world in action, nor engines of state to keep the unlearned world in awe; no, it appears by this book that they are sacred truths of undoubted certainty, and which all the wise and sober part of mankind have in every age subscribed and submitted to.³

Where do Job and his counselors derive their knowledge of God? During the time of Abraham and before the time of Moses, the Scriptures did not exist. Job and his counselors were also gentiles. These gentiles, as others, gain a knowledge of God from the *light of nature*. Job gives us a record of this natural theology. The aberrations manifested are no more serious than those closely held by many who now possess the Scriptures. God speaks later to clear Job and correct theological deliverances. Again, Job records debates in natural theology apart from Scripture. The light of nature may therefore be independent of Scripture.

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¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Bible*, 6 vols. (Nutley, NJ: Revell, n.d.), 6: 374.

² *Ibid.*, 6: 376-377.

³ *Ibid.*, 3: 2.

IN RESPONSE - THE LIGHT OF NATURE AND WESTMINSTER

by Dennis Prutow

We've looked briefly at John Murray, A. A. Hodge, Cornelius Van Til, and Matthew Henry. Matthew Henry gives a Puritan view of the *light of nature*. Murray and Hodge agree with Henry against Van Til on this point. Van Til maintains he expounds the Confessional meaning. This does not seem likely given Henry, Hodge, and Murray. Additionally, what does the Confession and Larger Catechism tell us about the *light of nature*?

Confession of Faith 1:6 declares "there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed." In determining the times for worship, the place and design of the worship facility, etc., use common sense. There are no specific injunction of Scripture. The Confession teaches the church is quite like other human societies in this respect.

Something else which is "common to human actions and societies" is the conduct of business in meetings and the decorum of the people present. We must treat one another with dignity. We must afford our opposition the respect due any image bearer of God. Common courtesy or the light of nature demands this.

Failure in this area aggravates our sin before God. Question 151 of the Larger Catechism 151 asks, "What are those aggravations that make some sins more heinous than others?" Here is a small piece of the lengthy answer: "Sins receive their aggravations . . . from the nature and quality of the offense: if it be against the . . . light of nature. . . ." Failure to treat officers of the church with common decency is a violation of the light of nature. It makes the sin involved more heinous in the sight of God.

Westminster Confession of Faith 21.1, "The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is good, and doth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. . . ."

The light of nature gives us the First Commandment, "You shall have no other god's before Me" (Exodus 20:3). As already seen, the created order presents the eternal power and divine nature of the Creator. The light of nature affirms the Second Commandment, "You shall not make for yourself and idol" (Exodus 20:4). Paul takes this position on Mars Hill when confronting philosophers of the day. "Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man" (Acts 17:29). The light of nature declares idolatry is sin.

The light of nature announces the Third Commandment, "You shall not take the name of the lord your God in vain" (Exodus 20:7). Common sense and decency plainly declares blasphemy is unacceptable to the Divine Being. Count the number of times unbelievers hold their tongue around ministers of the gospel or outspoken Christians.

Finally, the light of nature presses upon us the propriety of the Fourth Commandment, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy" (Exodus 20:8). Even unbelievers recognize God ought to be worshipped and worshipped regularly. This is true even though there may be less light of nature in this case as mentioned by the Larger Catechism, 121. Question: "Why is the word Remember set in the beginning of the fourth commandment?" Answer:

The word Remember is set in the beginning of the fourth commandment, partly, because of the great benefit of remembering it, we being thereby helped in our preparation to keep it, and, in keeping it, better to keep all the rest of the commandments, and to continue a thankful remembrance of the two great benefits of creation and redemption, which contain a short abridgment of religion; and partly, because we are very ready to forget it, for that there is less light of nature for it. . . .

Men and women attempt to guide their lives by the light of nature and so conclude they are eligible for heaven. But Larger Catechism 60 is clear. Question:

"Can they who have never heard the gospel, and so know not Jesus Christ, nor believe in him, be saved by their living according to the light of nature?" The answer is clearly negative.

They who, having never heard the gospel, know not Jesus Christ, and believe not in him, cannot be saved, be they never so diligent to frame their lives according to the light of nature, or the laws of that religion which they profess; neither is there salvation in any other, but in Christ alone, who is the Saviour only of his body the church.

Vain attempts to please God with good deeds attests to the reality of the light of nature. The Confession and Larger Catechism clearly regard the *light of nature* as real, clear, and operative independent of Scripture. This brings us back to our starting place, Romans 1:20. "Since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse."

The concluding clause of verse 20 may require the rendering given in the version—"that they may be without excuse," expressing purpose and not merely result. It would then be intimated that the design of God in giving so open and manifest a disclosure of his eternal power and divinity in his visible handiwork is that all men might be without excuse. If men do not glorify and worship him as God they have no excuse for their impiety, and that the *impiety* might be without excuse is the design of the manifested glory. Objection to this view fails to take account of the benignity and sufficiency of the revelation which renders men inexcusable.¹

The *light of nature* renders all people without excuse before God. It is a foundation for the gospel. Paul stands on the foundation of this witness in Acts 14:17.

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¹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 1: 40.