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IS NATURAL THEOLOGY BIBLICAL?

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Biblical data on God's self-disclosure through his creation clearly confirms the validity of natural revelation. Some apologists, however, advocate a natural theology that is derived from natural revelation. They argue that the unconverted can be introduced to God through natural theology.

The arguments for natural theology, however, are without biblical support. Natural theology is not a corollary of natural revelation, there are no examples of it in Scripture, and there is no biblical warrant for it, whether revelational, anthropological, or apologetic.

* * *

THE long-running debate over apologetic method between evidentialism and presuppositionalism (particularly of the Van Tilian variety) involves a wide range of issues. Out of that broad spectrum of dispute, it is sometimes difficult to demarcate precisely the dividing line between the two sides. It is even more difficult to find the source of that line of division. The issue of natural theology, however, should be recognized as the watershed of these two apologetic methods.¹

DEFINING NATURAL THEOLOGY

Though natural theology has been variously defined,² two basic definitions are noteworthy. First, natural theology denotes the development of an entire theological system without reference to revelation. This sense seems equivalent to natural religion, of which deism is a classic example. No known evangelical espouses this type of natural

¹I have argued elsewhere that contrary to the current consensus the two sides do not divide over the use of evidence or over engaging in argumentation with unbelievers ("Fideism and Presuppositionalism," *GTJ* 8:1 [March 1987] 89-99), nor over the common ground between believers and unbelievers ("Common Ground," Mid-Western Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, 1983).

²For example, J. V. Langmead Casserley identifies four senses: *Graceful Reason* (London: Longmans and Green, 1955) 2-5.

theology, and several explicitly reject it while espousing another type.³

The second meaning of natural theology differs significantly from the first meaning. Some propose that natural theology is the establishment of the existence and to some degree the character of God without recourse to revelation. A recent reference work in philosophy defines it as “the attempt to prove the existence of God, and sometimes human immortality too, from premises provided by observation of the ordinary course of nature.”⁴ The article goes on to distinguish this from revealed theology which concerns itself with “the contents and implications” of God’s revelation of Himself. Similarly, a recent theological dictionary states that natural theology is “traditionally that knowledge about God and the divine order which man’s reason can acquire without the aid of revelation.”⁵ The article attributes to this position the distinction between natural and revealed theology. It defines natural theology as “rational reflection on the question of divine existence.”⁶

Helm defines natural theology in this way:

By “natural theology” (or sometimes “rational theology”) is meant the procedure of establishing or making probable certain theological propositions about the existence and character of God, from premises of a non-theological character. Not only non-theological, however, but also premises the truth of which is acceptable to any (or almost any) rational man.⁷

A recent treatment differs slightly from these definitions. While the foregoing examples implicitly or explicitly contrast natural and revealed theology, Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley claim a compatibility between revelation and natural theology.

Simply stated, natural theology refers to knowledge of God acquired through nature. Classically, natural theology does not stand in contradiction to divine revelation nor does it exclude such revelation. In fact, natural theology is dependent upon divine revelation for its content.⁸

³For example, Gary Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 148–50; and R. C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 25.

⁴Anthony Flew, ed., *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York: St. Martin’s, 1984) 241.

⁵Alan Richardson and John Bowden, ed., *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 393.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Paul Helm, *The Divine Revelation* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 1982) 9.

⁸Sproul, Gerstner, Lindsley. *Classical Apologetics*, 25.

This is later restated: "Natural theology refers to a knowledge of God acquired from God's revelation of Himself in nature."⁹

If "revelation" in the earlier definitions of this second category is replaced with "special revelation" or "Scriptural revelation," the disparity disappears. Natural theology makes no use of Scripture, but it does insist that at least some of the aspects of reality indicate the existence and character of God.¹⁰

In this second meaning of natural theology, "natural" seems to refer to (1) the location of the revelation (the natural environment), and (2) the non-Scriptural character of this theological activity. It also seems to refer to (3) the natural condition of the human being apart from redemptive grace inasmuch as this grace of the Spirit is communicated only through the Word of God. While many natural theologians are regenerate, natural theology does not require the redemptive transformation of the practitioner. Natural theology, thus, is the elaboration of an entire theology by reason apart from revelation, or the establishment of the existence of the true God by reason, as natural revelation is studied without recourse to special revelation.

The second meaning of natural theology intends to establish for unbelievers the existence and, to some extent, the character of God from the unbeliever's perspective. Though the believer clearly affirms God and Scripture, for the purposes of the argument he puts that aside and works from the stance and the standards of the unbeliever. This type of natural theology involves no authoritative reference to or dependence upon the existence, character, or *activity* of God. To do so would be to work, not from the unbeliever's perspective, but from the believer's.

Common to both conceptions of natural theology is the refusal to use Scripture in the argumentation. In sharp contrast to this is a type of theistic argument which uses revelation as interpreted by Scripture. That is, using the Scriptural depiction of nature, an argument would present a view of the human race's environment to an unbeliever. This type of theistic argument is presented from the perspective of the believer as a representation of how he or she views the world. In Helm's words, this position asserts that

... the rational or natural "proofs" of God's existence are rational reconstructions based on the concept of God derived from the Christian Scriptures . . . If such a view could be sustained then presumably the function of the proofs would be to extend knowledge that God exists

⁹Ibid., 26.

¹⁰Ontological arguments perhaps are an exception to this dependence upon a revelatory reality.

to those either without the benefit of special revelation or who had rejected it.¹¹

This is an affirmation and use of natural revelation which is quite distinct from natural theology. It thus represents a creative alternative to the Barth-Brunner debate which seemed erroneously to assume that natural theology was the unavoidable consequence of an acknowledgment of a clear natural revelation.¹² There seems to be no reason to assume that God's self-disclosure in the created order is intended to be interpreted independently of God's verbal self-disclosure. On the contrary, the biblical pattern seems to be that "God's Word (whether oral or written) interprets God's world." This is true even in the Garden of Eden where holy humans in an unmarred environment "lived by every word that proceeded from the mouth of God." Whether this pattern holds true for the rest of Scripture is the subject of the next section of this paper. For now, it is sufficient to point out that natural revelation and natural theology are not necessarily correlative concepts (though, of course, they are not necessarily incompatible either). It is perfectly plausible to grant a disclosure by God in the creation and to deny that it is permissible to elaborate a theology, however limited in scope, by natural reason alone. Natural revelation and natural theology, after all, are performed by different agents: *God* reveals himself while *humans* theologize.

In short, God has disclosed himself in the created order (natural revelation), and he intends for his people to develop a theology of nature, i.e., a Scriptural perspective upon the created order, whether this takes the form of an ecological program of action or a theistic argument displaying God's existence and character to an unbeliever. However, the existence of this natural revelation does not imply that it is intended to be treated independently. Support for a natural theology must be sought elsewhere than in the doctrine of natural revelation.

ARE THERE BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF NATURAL THEOLOGY?

In addition to the assertion of the correlative relationship between natural revelation and natural theology, natural theology is defended on the grounds of its inclusion in the biblical record. Two accounts seem central: Paul and Barnabas at Lystra (Acts 14:8-18) and Paul at the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-34).

¹¹Helm, *Divine Revelation*, 12.

¹²Karl Barth's (and to a lesser extent Emil Brunner's) failure to distinguish the question of natural theology from the question of natural revelation is a prime reason for the frustrating nature of their dispute in *Natural Theology* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946).

Lystra

At Lystra, Paul healed a man who had been listening to him preach the gospel. From this, the residents concluded that Paul and Barnabas were the Greek gods, Hermes and Zeus, and they prepared to sacrifice to them. The apostles rushed to prevent this sacrilege, explaining their true identity. Not gods but messengers of the living God, Paul and Barnabas had come to “preach the gospel” in order that these people might worship, not vain things, but the living God “Who made the heaven and the earth and sea and all that is in them” (v 15). This God was patient and long-suffering with the wickedness of men, having withheld judgment from them. Instead, he continually witnessed to them of his existence in doing good to them by giving rain and harvests which physically and emotionally filled them.

It seems clear from this passage that Paul and Barnabas are doing a theology of nature and not a natural theology. First, the background for their statements in vv 15–17 is their preaching of the gospel. They do not change their perspective in this next stage (note the verb εὐαγγελιζόμενοι in v 15). Second, a portion of their statement is a direct quotation from Exod 20:11. Moreover, they seem to be announcing unknown truths to these people. Rather than assuming a common epistemic stance, they differentiate between their knowledge and their audience’s lack of knowledge.

Though the passage does not rule out natural theology, it at least is unsupportive of it. Though the people of Lystra had lived their entire lives surrounded by God’s witness to himself by his generous gifts, they did not seem to have profited from it. In their *natural* condition, surrounded by God’s witness in the *natural* environment as viewed *naturally*, i.e., apart from Scripture, they did not affirm and worship the true God. They even misunderstood the sign-miracles and message of the servants of the true God. In their case, a truthful natural theology was not an obvious corollary of natural revelation.

Athens

Paul’s address to the Athenian philosophers in session at the Areopagus is probably the most often discussed apologetic incident in Scripture. For many, this passage is paradigmatic for apologetics in its use of natural theology.¹³ Accordingly, Paul attempted to establish the truth of Christianity by starting from propositions affirmed by the Athenian philosophers. These propositions included some drawn from observation of the natural order. These Athenians had already begun the elaboration of a truthful natural theology. Paul’s goal was

¹³See e.g., Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 13, 170–71.

to lead them on further in that task and then to connect this theology with the historical message of the Gospel. Inasmuch as the Athenians did not know or accept Scripture, Paul omitted reference to it, using instead Greek philosophy, the natural order, and history.

This is a common interpretation of this passage in support of natural theology, but it is erroneous.¹⁴ The address summarized in Acts 17:22–31 was not the beginning of Paul's activity in Athens. Rather, it was an explanatory speech in response to queries by those who heard Paul "reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be present" (v 17). Paul sought not to introduce the truth to these men, but rather to explain that to which they had already been introduced. It would seem to follow that his method has not changed from the earlier to the later discussions. The earlier reasoning was apparently a typical Pauline advocacy of the Gospel to idolators (see, e.g., 1 Thess 1:2–10). The later explanation would not need a change in epistemic warrant (i.e., natural reason instead of Scripture).

Paul selected an inscription from one of Athens's many altars as the topical point of contact. "While I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, 'TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.' What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you" (v 23). Paul had already described his audience as *δεισιδαιμονεστέρους* (v 22). The word can mean either "very religious" or "very superstitious" depending upon the context; perhaps Paul was intentionally ambiguous or ironic. The Athenians had manifested their ardent religiosity (which in fact amounted to no more than superstition) by including among their many altars one which was dedicated to "the Unknown God." This was apparently to prevent an omission due to oversight or ignorance. Paul took this as an admission of at least partial ignorance or uncertainty and addressed this need. He announced his intention to

¹⁴See the extensive literature on this passage including F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (New International Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954) 348–65; *idem*, *The Defense of the Gospel in the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 39–49; *idem*, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 235–47; Bertil Gartner, *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation* (Uppsala: C. W. Gleerup, 1955); I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 281–91; H. P. Owen, *NTS* 5 (1958–59) 133–43; Ned B. Stonehouse, *Paul before the Areopagus* (London: Tyndale, 1951). For a somewhat different view, see Stephen G. Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1973) 196–218, and also C. K. Barrett, "Paul's Speech on the Areopagus" in *New Testament Christianity For Africa and the World*, ed. M. E. Glasswell and E. W. Fashole-Luke (London: SPCK, 1974) 69–77.

proclaim (καταγγέλλω) to them that which they worshiped in ignorance. The apostle made a sharp distinction between his audience and himself. They were in ignorance while he was in the truth. What they needed he intended to deliver to them. Epistemic divergence, rather than commonality, seemed to be Paul's point. "Proclaim" is an unlikely word for a natural theology term; other phrasing would be expected to indicate the *commonality* of the project to *establish* or *verify* the issue under discussion.¹⁵

The point of contact that Paul chose became the theme of his remarks. The entire address as recorded by Luke developed the character of the true God. First, Paul described him as the Creator who was greater than man-made objects and, as self-sufficient, the source of life for all creation. He continued by noting the solidarity of the human race which God made, his sovereignty over human affairs, and his status as the true object of humanity's worship, to all of whom he was accessible because they lived by means of him. Yet this true object of worship was not a man-made idol, but rather was the exemplar whom man imaged. Finally, Paul announced that this God was patient, having withheld judgment thus far, but was calling for repentance before the day of judgment by Christ, whose uniqueness had been demonstrated by the resurrection.

Paul did not build primarily upon common affirmations, leading the Athenians gradually to a Christian profession as a natural outgrowth of their present beliefs. He seemed rather to be setting Christianity in fundamental opposition to their present beliefs (which of course does not imply that they knew *no* true religious propositions nor that Paul had *no* common affirmations with them). The first instance of this was the introduction which contrasted ignorance with knowledge. This was followed by the doctrine of creation in opposition to the eternality of matter and the world and to the distinction between the supreme being and the anthropomorphic deities involved in earth history. The true God did not dwell in temples, but Athens was full of shrines for numerous gods. Paul's God had no need of human help in contrast to the gods of the Greek religions.

While Greeks in general and Athenians in particular were elitists, claiming supremacy because of their appeal (in the case of Athens) to unique origins by divine action, Paul proclaimed the unity of the human race. Reversing the pattern of the Greek anthropomorphic gods, Paul proclaimed a humanity in the image of God.

¹⁵"Proclaim" seems more indicative of evangelism or preaching than of apologetics, at least as typically conceived. I have wondered in recent years whether *any* school of apologetical thought can use this account as a paradigmatic defense of the faith. Perhaps this should rather be described as "evangelistic theologizing."

In the context of these statements about humanity's relationship to God, Paul quoted at least one pagan author and perhaps a second.¹⁶ He himself identified one of these quotations pointing out a parallel to his assertions in the poet Aratus. Earlier in v 28, the phrase, "in him we live and move and exist" has been attributed to Epimenides the Cretan. Even these quotations did not reflect a common stance or perspective between Paul and his audience. Paul was accusing the Athenians of failing to be consistent with their own statements and was giving new meaning even to these statements. As Bruce says,

It is not suggested that even Paul of Acts (let alone the Paul whom we know from his letters) envisaged God in terms of the Zeus of Stoic pantheism, but if men whom his hearers recognized as authorities had used language which could corroborate his argument, he would quote their words, giving them a biblical sense as he did so.¹⁷

Moreover, the quotations pertain only to a subordinate point of the address which argues against the view that Paul built his entire sermon on common beliefs.

Paul concluded by warning that God's forbearance would soon end, followed by a day of judgment through a man who had been set apart from the rest of humanity by a special act of God's power, the resurrection from the dead. All of this was surely in opposition to the affirmations of the Greeks.

There is another indication of the biblical rather than natural basis of Paul's address, i.e., the echoes of OT language.¹⁸ God as "the maker of heaven and earth" is a familiar refrain in the OT; God's non-inhabitation of man-made shrines was asserted by Solomon (1 Kgs 8:27) and, perhaps more significantly for Paul, by Stephen (Acts 7:48-50). Ps 50:9-12 records the irrelevance of human provision for God. According to Deut 32:8, God established the bounds of the peoples. Man as the image of God and the condemnation of idolatry both have obvious parallels in the Hebrew Scriptures. So too does the call for repentance in view of the coming day of judgment.

The conclusion is that Paul was summarizing biblical theology (though omitting textual or authorial citations) and setting it over against the views espoused by the Areopagites. This was his way of explaining the message which he had been arguing in the synagogue and the market place. The Areopagus address, therefore, does not

¹⁶See Bruce, *Paul*, 241-42; *idem*, *The Book of Acts*, 359-60, but see Gartner, *The Areopagus Speech*, 195.

¹⁷Bruce, *Paul*, 242. See also Gartner, *The Areopagus Speech*, 192-95, and Stonehouse, *Paul before the Areopagus*, 37.

¹⁸Bruce, *Paul*, 238-42; see also Gartner, *The Areopagus Speech*, 167-69.

support natural theology (although, again, it does not rule it out either).

DOES SCRIPTURE AUTHORIZE NATURAL THEOLOGY?

It seems that there are no biblical examples of natural theology; at least the two frequently cited passages do not qualify as natural theology. However, this alone does not preclude natural theology. After all, many things not exemplified in Scripture are nonetheless legitimate for Christians (e.g., heart transplants, vending machines, airplanes). Accordingly, the advocates of natural theology have identified biblical teachings which authorize natural theology.

In Its Teaching Concerning the Created Reality

Nature Psalms

One group of passages cited for support speak of the revelation of God by that which he made, sustains, and governs. For example, the nature Psalms (e.g., 8, 19, 29, 65, 104) are said to so emphasize the abundant and clear indications of God's activity that the human observer is made aware of him. This is true whether the person is a believer or an unbeliever, whether with or without the Scriptures.

This phenomenon in the created order and the descriptions of it in the Psalms do not provide a basis for natural theology. The Psalms are set in the midst of the people of God. They are the utterances of God's redeemed people based upon their experiences. The psalmists surely are not unredeemed people nor are they believers who bracket their faith in order to discourse with the unredeemed. The psalmists seem always to be looking at life in light of their identity as children of God.¹⁹ God is always in the picture, even when he seems unresponsive or distant. Life (whether joyous or sorrowful), God, and the redeemed seem to be a part of every psalm.

Another element seems to be latent in this picture, i.e., the Scriptures. God's Word as the account of God's deeds in history and the created order must be seen as the foundation of the life and perspective of the child of God. It nourishes him, encourages him, corrects him, and illumines his pathways. The law or statutes of the Lord are never far from the psalmist's thought. This suggests that the psalmists would find natural theology incompatible. The psalmists surely have a theology of nature and just as surely believe in natural revelation; but they do not seem to do natural theology.

¹⁹See the acknowledgment of this possibility by Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 237.

As argued above, the presence of natural revelation does not involve natural theology as a corollary. However clear may be God's self-disclosure through his creation, how human beings can and do respond to it is a distinct question, not resolvable by inference solely from the presence of the revelation in nature.

Romans I

The previous point is central to the other scriptural passage frequently used by advocates of natural theology. Romans I addresses both God's self-disclosure in creation and also humanity's response.²⁰ Two phrases indicate the revelation of God: "that which is known about God is evident within them" (v 19); "His invisible attributes, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made" (v 20).²¹

Paul deals more extensively with the human response to this clearly seen manifestation of God. He describes it in two ways. First, he asserts the knowledge of God which humans have because of this revelation: they "suppress the truth" (v 18) which requires that they have apprehended it, they "understood" and "clearly perceived" the revelation (v 20), they "know God" (v 21), and they "knew" the judgment of God (v 32).

Second, Paul characterizes humanity as not knowing God: "they become futile in their speculations, . . . their foolish heart was darkened" (v 21), "they become fools" (v 22), "they exchanged the truth of God for a lie" (v 25), "they did not approve of having God in their knowledge" (v 28), "God gave them over to a depraved mind" (v 29), and they are "without understanding" (v 31). Here the relevance of an examination of the meaning and interrelationship of believing and knowing is clear. The problem is more complex than whether or not unbelievers can or do "know God" or "know that there is a God."

²⁰See C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary On the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975, 1979) 1, 104-35; C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957) 31-41; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965) 34-53; Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 33-52; Emil Brunner, *The Letter to the Romans* (London: Lutterworth, 1959) 16-19; Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (London: SCM, 1952) 98-113. For some suggested correlations between Romans I and the Fall narrative in Genesis, see D. J. W. Milne, "Genesis 3 in the Letter to the Romans," *The Reformed Theological Review* 39:1 (Jan.-April 1980) 10-18.

²¹I am less concerned here with the precise locus of this "manifestation" which is "clearly seen" than with its reality (though I am inclined to concur with Beck's criticisms of Demarest's consideration of this passage as teaching an "effable intuition" which cannot be structured into a discursive demonstration. W. David Beck, review of Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation* in *JETS* 26:4 (December 1983) 462-64.

These phrases clearly establish that unbelievers are not unaware of the true and living God. The issue is rather what kind of knowledge of God they have.

A neglected aspect of this discussion is that there are different forms of knowledge. Scripture does not evidence a monolithic conception of knowledge, but rather uses the concept in a variety of senses (several of which overlap the different senses of belief). For this reason, Demarest's criticism of "persuasive definitions" in Kuyper, Berkouwer, and Van Til²² is inadequate (though it must be admitted that the distinctions were not clearly set forth by these men). Demarest's distinction between knowledge of God as Creator and knowledge of God as Redeemer not only inaccurately portrays Calvin's position,²³ it also fails as a Scriptural clarification of the admittedly ambiguous phrases, "true knowledge" or "pure knowledge," used by these theologians.

The difficulty lies, at least in part, in Demarest's understanding of Romans 1 as portraying a straightforward progression. He summarizes his view with "three important assertions": "Mankind properly perceives truth about God from nature (vv 19-21),"²⁴ "knowledge of God is mediated by natural revelation (v 20),"²⁵ and "man consistently suppresses all forms of general revelation (vv 21-32)."²⁶ This last assertion is amplified in three more statements. "Mankind uniformly repudiates the knowledge of God afforded by general revelation (Rom 1:21-22, 28a)."²⁷ "Man not only spurned the knowledge of God but he proceeds to fashion lifeless gods in the form of men, birds, animals, and reptiles (vv 23, 25). . . . That is, as a consequence of man's sinful rebellion, the light of knowledge of God becomes for him utter darkness."²⁸ Third, "God, because of man's willful rejection of the light, gave mankind up to their own inventions (vv 24, 26-32)."²⁹ Demarest apparently sees a progression: knowledge, rejection of knowledge, judicially imposed non-knowledge. Darkness replaces the rejected light.

It is more accurate to see a significant degree of epistemic simultaneity in Romans 1 (though progression surely is not entirely

²²Demarest, *General Revelation*, 139-40, 147.

²³For Demarest, knowledge of God as Creator is possible through general revelation alone while knowledge of God as Redeemer requires special revelation. For Calvin, the "spectacles of Scripture" are necessary for both types of knowledge. See his *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1, 6, i.

²⁴Demarest, *General Revelation*, 238.

²⁵Ibid., 239.

²⁶Ibid., 241.

²⁷Ibid., 244.

²⁸Ibid., 245.

²⁹Ibid., 245.

absent). Both knowledge and non-knowledge coexist in unregenerate human beings.³⁰ The only alternatives to this seem to be a “history of humanity” perspective wherein humankind as a whole goes through the stages (in which case any particular human being only experiences part of the progression) or an individual perspective in which every human being starts fresh with God and goes through each stage himself (but this too strongly resembles a Pelagian-like individualism). According to a simultaneous view, each human being, having been represented in Adam, is born in the condition of depravity and the relationship of spiritual death. Nonetheless, he cannot avoid knowing true propositions about God as well as being personally acquainted with God as the One who is wrathful towards him.³¹ Yet even while aware of God, he distorts and ignores and suppresses and disobeys this knowledge—all of which involve a form of “non-knowledge.” The unregenerate is always in a relationship with God (and is thus “acquainted” with him); he is almost always aware of him (i.e., aware of true propositions about him); yet he never loves him (an important sense of knowledge in Scripture), seldom obeys him (another important sense of knowledge); and always affirms some false propositions about God. In short, every unregenerate seems always characterized both by knowledge of God and also by non-knowledge of him.³² It is this differentiated conception of knowledge which Kuyper, Berkouwer, and Van Til apparently have in mind by their “persuasive definitions.” They surely do not intend to deny that unregenerate humans are aware of God, but they just as surely do not consider them to have knowledge of him involving “reverance, faith, submission, and fidelity” (which Demarest says are involved in the Hebrew perspective of “true knowledge”).³³

Perhaps this is the crux of the dispute. Natural theologians find both in Scripture and in experience that unregenerate human beings are aware of the existence and character of God even apart from Scripture and hence conclude that natural theology is legitimate.³⁴ Others, however, find that this awareness if not unqualified, that it only constitutes one (lower) form of knowledge according to Scrip-

³⁰See Gunther Bornkamm, “The Revelation of God’s Wrath: Romans 1-3” in his *Early Christian Experience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 53-69, and “Faith and Reason in Paul,” *ibid.*, 33-35.

³¹Demarest’s limitation of the unregenerate’s knowledge of God to knowledge about God while salvation introduces *personal* knowledge of God is inadequate.

³²See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987) 58-59.

³³Demarest, *General Revelation*, 247. Demarest affirms this (persuasively defined?) “true knowledge” only of believers.

³⁴Sproul, Gerstner, and Lindsley, *Classical Apologetics*, 62-63.

ture, and, even so, that it does not lead to a loving and submissive response to God. Consequently, they consider natural theology—as a conscious, programmatic, and “open-minded” epistemic project—an impossibility.³⁵ No unregenerate can start from scratch in an attempt to establish whether or not a god of such and such a character exists. Every human being already is aware of the true God and already has responded disobediently and dishonestly to this awareness. This is not to say that argument with unregenerates is futile (Scripture clearly supports the legitimacy of “reasoning,” “disputing,” “persuading,” etc.); only that argument with them which assumes unawareness of God and neutrality or open-mindedness toward Him is erroneous.

In Its Teaching Concerning Unregenerate Humans and Apologetics

Here the line is crossed from merely the lack of scriptural support for natural theology to the biblical illegitimacy of natural theology. Unregenerates, inescapably aware of God and continually rebellious against God, cannot be *introduced* to God. Conversion is an introduction only to a *new level or type* of knowledge of God. Unregenerates are “knowledgeable suppressors of truth”; as such they need a deepening *and* a purifying of their knowledge of God. It is too late to *introduce* the awareness of God, and it is too optimistic to regard them simply as “accurate yet partial” knowers of God. Their present knowledge needs not merely additions but also corrections. Neither the additions nor the corrections will be received with open arms. This new information about God will be no more hospitably treated than was the previous information. Natural theology seems at times to overestimate the reception both of the previously acquired knowledge of God as well as of that knowledge which it contributes. The stance of the unbeliever is not merely *outside* of the Kingdom of God, but also *against* the Kingdom. He/she is not a spectator, but an opponent. This is not to deny that unregenerates can be “open and receptive” to the Gospel by the ministry of the Spirit, but only to affirm that even then, being convicted and drawn by the Spirit, they are not neutral and devoid of an awareness of God. In short, natural theology is illegitimate because of its overestimation of the unbeliever’s condition (particularly epistemically).³⁶

Another reason that natural theology is an illegitimate method of apologetics is that Scripture, in its use of the terms ἀπολογία and ἀπολογέομαι in the NT and in its accounts of apologetic encounters,

³⁵The Sproul *et al.* conclusion is too minimalistic a definition. For them, natural theology occurs prior to the evangelistic/apologetic encounter. Yet the term generally seems to be used to also include an activity that is part of the encounter.

³⁶For further discussion of this, see my “Common Ground,” 4–7.

always represents apologetics as the defense of the true faith by one who already believes it from a stance in this faith and in opposition (though meekly) to unbelief. Whether it be Moses before Pharaoh or Elijah on Mt. Carmel or Jesus or Peter before the Jewish leaders or Paul before Gentiles, apologists in Scripture always work from an explicit stance in the faith as known through God's word-deed revelation. Even before Gentiles, as argued above, Paul never "lays aside Scripture" to work from the stance and values of unbelievers. Yet this is what natural theology seems most predominantly to advocate. The premise that a meaningful disputation can only occur if common epistemic standards and perspectives are used needs reconsideration. All that is needed is a common topic of concern, a common identity as humans imaging God (however ethically anti-theological that imaging may be) and a common ontic environment. Scripture as God's normative disclosure provides the content and the perspective for biblical apologetics even though one party in the dispute does not accept its authority.

CONCLUSION

Both of natural theology's fundamental premises—that unbelievers are more likely to be responsive to presentations of theism or Christianity if presented on their own terms, and that the apologetic encounter requires a common epistemic foundation—conflict with Scripture. The possible greater response is not worth the adoption of an improper method. Moreover, the ontic and topical common ground is sufficient to permit rational disputation. Therefore, Scripture has neither the example of nor the warrant for natural theology. Although both a theology of nature and natural revelation are biblical, natural theology is not.