REFORMING APOLOGETICS

RETRIEVING the CLASSIC REFORMED APPROACH to DEFENDING the FAITH

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For
John Valero Jr.,
Robert Riley,
and
Carmen Penelope

Contents

Preface

The first theological book to capture my attention was Josh McDowell's two-volume work, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*.[1] I had recently graduated from college and was doing my best to ignore God's call on my life. Ever since my teen years, I had sensed that I was supposed to pursue ordained ministry but fled like Jonah. One day in a Christian bookstore, McDowell's books caught my eye. I bought them and was enthralled. Providence used these books to convince me to stop running and go to seminary. During my time in seminary, I continued to study apologetics. I double minored in historical theology and philosophy of religion and majored in systematic theology. When I wrote my master's thesis as an apologetic defense of the doctrine of Scripture against the claims of postmodern philosophy, I integrated the disciplines of philosophy and theology. During my doctoral studies, I continually encountered books and essays that dealt with the apologetics of Reformed theology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but I began to notice that there were some significant differences between what I read in the pages of Francis Turretin's (1623–87) *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, for example, and what I heard people saying in the church. I eventually published two essays in which I recorded some of my findings, particularly as they pertained to the contemporary reception of natural theology.[2] In the years since, I have also documented some of the reasons why contemporary Reformed theologians

1. Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, 2 vols. (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life, 1986).

2. J. V. Fesko, "The Days of Creation and Confession Subscription in the OPC," *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2001): 235–49, esp. 238–39; J. V. Fesko and Guy M. Richard, "Natural Theology and the Westminster Confession of Faith," in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, ed. J. Ligon Duncan, 3 vols. (Fearn, UK: Mentor, 2009), 3:223–66.

disagreed with Reformed Orthodox teachings on natural theology.[3] Amid this ongoing research, I had opportunities to crystallize my thought when, on two different occasions, I taught a course on theological prolegomena and basic apologetics. I wanted my students to have the best of both worlds, the best of what Reformed Orthodoxy has to say on issues related to apologetics, and the best of what contemporary Reformed theologians have claimed. This book represents the culmination of my thinking about these things on and off for the last twenty-five years. I write primarily from the vantage point of systematic and historical theology, my chief areas of training and study. I do not claim to be an expert in apologetics, as there are many gifted and well-trained apologists who address technical issues quite well. Nevertheless, I address theological and historical issues that pertain to the very foundations of the art and science of apologetics, and thus I seek to reform aspects of the church's present-day apologetic enterprise.

On the whole, this book is about retrieving the classic Reformed approach to defending the faith. Categories such as *common notions* and *the order of nature* once filled the pages of Reformed works but now seldom appear. This is due, in large part, to a shift in theological convictions among contemporary Reformed theologians. There is a general distrust of natural theology. I hope to present evidence that would make people reconsider their aversion to its use in theology and apologetics. In God's providence for his church, theologians and philosophers of the last century—such as Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til, and Herman Dooyeweerd—were not shy about recalibrating Reformed theology where they believed they detected shortcomings. Van Til, for example, forcefully critiqued Old Princeton theologians Charles Hodge and B. B. Warfield, and he registered his dissatisfaction with Kuyper and Herman Bavinck on a number of points with the goal of presenting a clearer exposition of Reformed apologetics. He criticized these theologians not out of pride but out of a desire to remain faithful to Scripture. This is the manner in which I present the material that follows, as I focus on and respectfully challenge some of Van Til's and Dooyeweerd's claims. I intend this critique in the spirit of Van Til's festschrift, *Jerusalem and Athens*, in which contributors engaged in appreciative but at times critical dialogue with him. In those places where I disagree with Van Til, were he still alive, I suspect he would openly welcome the disagreement and engage in hearty dialogue. Van Til would undoubtedly agree that no one is above critique, and Scripture must always be the supreme judge by which all things in religion are determined.

3. J. V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption: Origins, Development, and Reception* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 187–97.

I am convinced that Christians need to present their arguments from the authority of Scripture, identify false and erroneous thought embedded in unbelief, and approach unbelievers in terms of their God-defined status as covenant breakers. We must not engage unbelievers in terms of naked reason or the so-called neutral ground of bare logic. I believe Christians must approach apologetics in terms of faith seeking understanding, always mindful of the antithesis of the gospel over and against any claims of unbelief. But at the same time, my aim is to draw the church's attention back to the book of nature, so that we can use both books—nature and Scripture—in the defense of the faith.

Acknowledgments

The sixteenth-century poet and theologian John Donne (1572–1631) once wrote, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." These words echo in my mind as I think of the number of colleagues and friends who have rendered their assistance along the journey that has been the writing of this book. Thanks to my faculty colleagues, students, and former students who read earlier drafts. Thanks to James Dolezal, Paul Helm, Thomas Joseph White, Keith Matthison, R. C. Sproul, Danny Olinger, David Sytsma, Richard Barcellos, Liam Goligher, Richard Gamble, John Muether, Jay Collier, Mike Allen, Stefan Linblad, Matthew Barrett, Brian Hecker, and Jeff Waddington for their helpful comments and feedback. I am also grateful to Scott Oliphint for his candid negative critique, but I respectfully dissent. I am seeking to return us not "to the vomit of Rome" (as he put it to me) but to historic Reformed confessional theology. I am especially thankful to Richard Muller, who read through two drafts of the book, offered excellent feedback, and provided fantastic camaraderie throughout the process. I owe great thanks to David Noe, who carefully read through my manuscript and made many helpful substantive and editorial suggestions. I am also thankful to Jim Kinney, Dave Nelson, Wells Turner, and the whole team at Baker Academic for their continual support. As much as I appreciate all the assistance from the aforementioned friends and colleagues, this work contains my own views and are not those of my colleagues or my employer, Westminster Seminary California.

My family deserves significant thanks and recognition: they have been Aaron and Hur to me by holding me up in prayer during the process of seeing this book to press. Thanks to my in-laws, Bob and Linda Jones; my parents, Lee and Eren Fesko; my children, Val, Rob, and Carmen; and especially my wife,

Anneke. Dearest wife, you have been a rock to me throughout this process and have continually pointed me to Christ. Thank you for encouraging me to be a better man, husband, father, and minister of God's Word.

I wrote this book chiefly because I want my children to be fully equipped for the defense of the faith. I want you always to be ready to give a reason for the hope that is within you (1 Pet. 3:15). I want you to read both of God's books with great profit, the books of nature and Scripture. So, it is to you, John Valero Jr., Robert Riley, and Carmen Penelope, that I dedicate this book.

Abbreviations

General and Bibliographic

&c.	*et cetera*
§(§)	section(s)
AD	*anno Domini*, in the year of our Lord
ANF	*The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe. 10 vols. New York: Christian Literature, 1885–87. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.
art.	article
BC	before Christ
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
bk.	book
ca.	circa
cf.	*confer*, compare
chap(s).	chapter(s)
col(s).	column(s)
comm.	comments on
d.	died
disp.	disputation
div.	division
EBC	Expositor's Bible Commentary
ed(s).	editor(s), edited by, edition
e.g.	*exempli gratia*, for example
esp.	especially
ESV	English Standard Version
et al.	*et alii*, and others
FC	Formula of Concord
ff.	and following
fl.	flourished
fol(s).	folio(s)
HWT	historic worldview theory
ICC	International Critical Commentary
i.e.	*id est*, that is
KJV	King James Version
lect.	lecture
n.d.	no date
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
no(s).	number(s)
NPNF[1]	*A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. 1st series. Edited by Philip Schaff. 14 vols. New York: Christian Literature, 1886–89. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.
p(p).	page(s)
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
PSR	principle of sufficient reason
pt.	part

q(q).	question(s)
r	recto
rep. obj.	reply to the objection
repr.	reprint
rev.	revised (by)
SCG	*Summa contra Gentiles*
serm.	sermon
s.v.	*sub verbo*, under the word
TAG	transcendental arguments for the existence of God
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
trans.	translator, translated by
v	verso
vol(s).	volume(s)
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis
Exod.	Exodus
Lev.	Leviticus
Num.	Numbers
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Josh.	Joshua
Judg.	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1–2 Sam.	1–2 Samuel
1–2 Kings	1–2 Kings
1–2 Chron.	1–2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh.	Nehemiah
Esther	Esther
Job	Job
Ps(s).	Psalm(s)
Prov.	Proverbs
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Song	Song of Songs
Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Lam.	Lamentations
Ezek.	Ezekiel
Dan.	Daniel
Hosea	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad.	Obadiah
Jon.	Jonah
Mic.	Micah
Nah.	Nahum
Hab.	Habakkuk
Zeph.	Zephaniah
Hag.	Haggai
Zech.	Zechariah
Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Rom.	Romans
1–2 Cor.	1–2 Corinthians
Gal.	Galatians
Eph.	Ephesians
Phil.	Philippians
Col.	Colossians
1–2 Thess.	1–2 Thessalonians
1–2 Tim.	1–2 Timothy
Titus	Titus
Philem.	Philemon
Heb.	Hebrews
James	James
1–2 Pet.	1–2 Peter
1–3 John	1–3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev.	Revelation

Introduction

> We know God by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, since that universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: God's eternal power and divinity.
>
> Belgic Confession, article II

> Man must be twice converted, first from the natural to the spiritual life, and then from the spiritual to the natural.
>
> Herman Bavinck

The divine library consists of two beautiful books, the book of nature and the book of Scripture. In the wake of the Protestant Reformation, theologians promoted *sola scriptura*, that Scripture alone is the sole authority in the life and doctrine of the church. As a result of this doctrinal commitment, Reformation theologians have heavily used the book of Scripture. The book has been preserved over the years; its cover and pages show signs of regular and consistent use well into the present day. However, within the Reformed community the book of nature sits on the shelf largely unused and covered in a layer of dust. In the early modern period, most notably the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, despite the prominent use of the book of Scripture, the book of nature was still regularly used by theologians. Evidence for the use of both books appears prominently in a number of major Reformed confessions, such as the Gallican (1559) and Belgic (1561). The Gallican states that God reveals himself "in his works, in their creation, as well as in their preservation

and control," and "more clearly, in his word" (II).[1] Likewise, the Belgic Confession likens the creation to "a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God: his eternal power and his divinity, as the apostle Paul says in Romans 1:20" (II).

Similarly, the Westminster Confession (1647) speaks of the light of nature as that which manifests the goodness, wisdom, and power of God (1.1) and provides general principles for ordering worship (1.5); as the means by which unbelievers might morally frame their lives (10.4); as a guardian against the abuse of Christian liberty (20.4); and as the means by which all people know that God should be worshiped (21.1). Early modern Reformed theologians willingly employed the book of nature for a number of theological purposes but at the same time carefully defined its limits. The Westminster Confession, for example, opens with reference to the light of nature but immediately explains: "Yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation" (1.1). Reformed theologians acknowledged the reality and utility of natural revelation, namely, the knowledge of God in creation, as well as a limited and carefully defined natural theology. That is, they acknowledged that there were certain truths available to the powers of natural reason. Just as one can exegete the book of Scripture, so too one can exegete the book of nature and make true claims about God. But the Reformed theologians were clear: this knowledge is not saving but is complementary to supernatural revelation (Scripture). The book of Scripture gives knowledge of Christ and salvation and thus takes interpretive priority in the exegesis of the book of nature.[2] Natural theology is drawn from the order of nature, and supernatural theology, which transcends human reason, is drawn from the order of grace. Both forms of knowledge are revealed and are not merely a matter of human discovery.[3] From the *principium* of Scripture, Reformed theologians employed natural theology to establish general rules of morality, restrain sin, and leave fallen humanity without an excuse for rejecting God.[4] In other words, Reformed theologians made regular use of the book of nature.

Opinions about the utility and legitimacy of this book changed in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Reformed theologians began to take a decidedly negative attitude toward any use of the book of nature.

1. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations and references from confessional and catechetical documents come from Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, 3 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

2. Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:280.

3. Muller, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:283.

4. Muller, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:286.

Enlightenment philosophy made inroads into different corners of the Reformed world, and philosophical monism in particular was influential. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century idealist philosophers argued that a system of thought had to be deduced from one principle. In technical terms, theologians sought to deduce their systems from one central dogma, which stood in contrast to early modern models that recognized two starting points, namely, Scripture and God.[5]

Philip Schaff (1819–93), for example, explains that a dogmatic system "ought to have a central idea which dominates the several parts and sheds light upon them." Schaff identified the centers of many different theological schools of thought but ultimately opined that Christology was the only doctrine that should have this role: "The center is not the beginning, but it throws light on the beginning and the end. Christology furnishes the key for theology and anthropology." Schaff believed "the best modern systems of evangelical theology in Europe and America are tending more and more toward the Christocentric theology."[6] Schaff was not alone but was part of a greater idealist-influenced theological movement that shifted attention away from the book of nature to the book of Scripture because Christology appears only in the latter, not in the former. This theological bud fully flowered in the twentieth-century Reformed community.

Karl Barth (1886–1968) is perhaps the best-known twentieth-century Reformed opponent of natural theology. Barth famously debated Emil Brunner (1889–1966) and metaphorically pounded his shoe on his desk in Khrushchev-like fashion when he said "Nein!" to Brunner's defense of natural theology. Barth rejected any theology that differed fundamentally from Jesus Christ and whose method differed from the exegesis of Scripture. Barth believed that the church should bypass natural theology as one would pass by an abyss lest one be plunged into its foreboding depths.[7] Barth was not alone in his assessment as a wide spectrum of Reformed theologians made similar claims. Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987) claimed, "No form of natural theology has ever spoken properly of the God who is there."[8] These Reformed theologians and philosophers criticized early modern Reformed theologians for reintroducing scholasticism to the biblically pure theology of the Reformation. Their forebearers,

5. Muller, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:123–48, esp. 125.

6. Philip Schaff, *Theological Propaedeutic: A General Introduction to the Study of Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), 362–63.

7. Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply "No!" by Dr. Karl Barth* (1946; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 75.

8. Cornelius Van Til, "Letter to Francis Schaeffer," March 11, 1969, 1.

they claimed, engaged in synthesizing thought, which these critics understood as an effort to combine pagan Greek philosophy with scriptural teaching.[9]

Alvin Plantinga summarizes the overall negative assessment of natural theology, which ranges from indifference, suspicion, and hostility to accusations of blasphemy.[10] In Plantinga's examination of John Calvin's (1509–64) attitudes toward natural theology, he concludes: "The Christian doesn't need natural theology, either as the source of his confidence or to justify his belief."[11] Others have come to similar conclusions through slightly different historical and exegetical routes. First Corinthians 2:6–16 is supposedly "the death blow to all natural theology," and thus "natural theology may have a place in Roman Catholic and Arminian theologies . . . but not in a theology that would be Reformed."[12] Given the contemporary evangelical antipathy to natural theology and the efforts of some to extirpate it from Reformed theology, the book of nature has been placed back on the shelf and sits unused beneath a thick layer of dust in many parts of the Reformed world.

The goal of this essay is to retrieve the book of nature primarily for use in defending the faith, or apologetics. While theologians and historians may debate the precise nature and definition of natural theology, the Reformed confessional witness clearly attests to the veracity and utility of the book of nature, or in other terms, the *light of nature*. There are many avenues by which one might investigate the history and viability of the book of nature, but I approach it via two chief subjects: common notions and their connections to the order of nature. Put differently, this essay explores the connections between the innate and acquired knowledge of God—the knowledge that God inscribes on human hearts, which they bear by virtue of their identity as divine image-bearers, and the connections that this innate knowledge has to the broader created world. As Francis Turretin (1623–87) explains, historically the Reformed acknowledged natural and supernatural theology: "The natural, occupied with that which may be known of God (*to gnōston tou Theou*), is both innate (from the common notions implanted in each one) and acquired (which creatures gain discursively)."[13] Reformed theologians constructed their concept of *common notions* from the books of both nature

9. E.g., B. J. van der Walt, *Heartbeat: Taking the Pulse of Our Christian Theological and Philosophical Heritage* (Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University, 1978), 278–98.

10. Alvin Plantinga, "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology," in *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, ed. Michael Peterson et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 329.

11. Plantinga, "Reformed Objection," 333.

12. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., "Some Epistemological Reflections on 1 Cor 2:6–16," *Westminster Theological Journal* (1995): 123–24.

13. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992–97), 1.2.7.

and Scripture, from the testimony of pagan authorities as well as a number of biblical passages, most notably Romans 1:19–20 and 2:14–15.

The effort to recover the book of nature for the defense of the faith begins with a positive exposition of key concepts through a historical survey of the *light of nature* in the Westminster Confession, common notions, and Calvin's views on the book of nature. Chapter 1 therefore surveys the concept of the light of nature in the Westminster Confession. The phrase appears five times but often receives scant attention from commentators. This chapter explores the concept both through the Confession as well as the lectures of a key Westminster divine, Anthony Burgess (d. 1664). Burgess presented his lectures on the law of God at the same time as the divines were writing the Confession, and thus these lectures provide significant illumination on what the Confession means by invoking the term *light of nature*. Under this category, Burgess introduces the concept of common notions (the innate natural knowledge of God) as well as delineates how human reason functions in a postfall world. This chapter therefore explores the concept of the light of nature, enabling readers to see how classic Reformed theology stands at odds with the opinions of many contemporary Reformed theologians and philosophers.

Chapter 2 delves more deeply into the subject of common notions by first exploring Burgess's exegesis of Romans 2:14–15, the chair passage (*sedes doctrinae*) for the concept. This chapter reveals both the exegetical footing and the amicable interaction that Burgess had with numerous theological and philosophical authorities, most notably Thomas Aquinas (1225–74). The chapter therefore sets forth Burgess's concept of common notions and their connections to Aquinas and then situates his views within the larger early modern Reformed context to demonstrate that Burgess's views were unexceptional. The use of common notions was no aberration but rather the majority report. Although there were holdouts in the Reformed tradition, such as theologians Charles Hodge (1797–1878) and Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), with the dawn of the Enlightenment and march into the present, the concept of common notions was cast aside.

Chapter 3 examines the views of John Calvin on the book of nature, but more specifically common notions and their connection to the order of nature. This chapter explores Calvin's views, not because they are in any way normative for the tradition, the benchmark for subsequent "Calvinists," but rather because so many in the contemporary period appeal to him. Many historians and theologians have created a Calvin of myth and ignore the Calvin of history. That is, the Calvin of myth supposedly rejected all manifestations of natural theology, began with the self-attesting Christ of Scripture as his starting point, scuttled all forms of scholasticism and synthetic thinking, and thus rejected the

traditional proofs for the existence of God. This chapter challenges the Calvin of myth and seeks to recover the Calvin of history with respect to his use of the book of nature. In line with the majority report, Calvin advocated a version of common notions, namely, the Stoic concept of *prolēpsis* or "preconception," and connected this innate knowledge of God to the broader created order. The Calvin of history employs both common notions and the scholastic method, and he presents his own versions of some of the traditional arguments for the existence of God. In short, these first three chapters establish the historical legitimacy of the use of common notions and their connections to the order of nature within historic confessional Reformed theology.

Chapter 4 turns from positive historical exposition to the first of four critical issues: Aquinas, historic worldview theory, transcendental arguments, and dualisms. Contemporary Reformed theologians have made a number of claims that present hurdles that must be overcome in order to recover the book of nature for apologetics. Therefore, chapter 4 deals with a number of contemporary claims, chiefly from Cornelius Van Til, regarding Aquinas. According to Van Til, one of the supposedly disqualifying features of common notions is that they rest upon the results of synthetic thought: Aquinas built his theological foundation on philosophy instead of Scripture. Thus Aquinas and any positive appeal to him ultimately rest upon autonomous reason rather than Scripture. If Van Til's critique of Aquinas is correct, then there are significant problems for historic Reformed theology, since it has broad agreement with Aquinas on the subject of common notions. The chapter demonstrates, however, that Van Til largely misread Aquinas due to his overreliance on secondary sources and that Van Til and Aquinas actually have more in common than Van Til realized. Both theologians start from a foundation of Scripture; Aquinas is not a rationalist. Thus the Reformed Orthodox appeal to and agreement with Aquinas on common notions is not an obstacle to their recovery and utility for apologetics.

Chapter 5 probes matters related to historic worldview theory (hereafter HWT). The rise of philosophical idealism was one of the reasons why the book of nature was largely set aside, namely the idea that one must have a comprehensive view of life and the world that has a solitary starting point unfolding into a holistic system of thought. Nineteenth-century advocates of HWT believed that there was no common doctrine of man (hence no divinely inscribed common notions); thus all worldviews were incommensurable, or mutually contradictory. Evangelical and Reformed theologians—most notably James Orr (1844–1913), Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), and Van Til—embraced elements of HWT, which diminished the role of the book of nature in Orr's and Van Til's apologetic systems. Kuyper mitigated the effects of

HWT by advocating a robust doctrine of common grace, but Van Til mostly rejected common notions because of his commitment to the idea that worldviews are incommensurable due to their supposed origins in synthesis thinking. What Van Til rejected with one hand, however, he reintroduced with the other: Van Til rejected common notions and instead argued that Christians have to appeal to unbelievers on the basis of the innate knowledge of God, their identity as divine image-bearers, and their status as covenant breakers. Van Til needlessly distanced himself from historic Reformed theology. But for all his protestations, he nevertheless advocated the same concepts under a different name. Once again, though Van Til chided the Reformed Orthodox and others such as Herman Bavinck for their use of common notions, Van Til actually employs the same concepts.

Chapter 5 also explores the impact of HWT on contemporary Reformed theology, specifically how it has unnecessarily diminished the use of the book of nature. Through exegetical argumentation I show how Paul in Romans 2:14–15 and Acts 17 employed common notions as a part of his theology and his efforts to evangelize the lost. The implication of this exegesis is that Christians must not shy away from employing the book of nature in our theology or apologetics. Common notions are a vital part of God's natural revelation and thus fundamental to good theology. Believers and unbelievers have multiple points of contact, but among them are their shared common notions—the divinely inscribed innate natural knowledge of God. Thus believers can appeal to these common notions in the defense of the faith: they can appeal to God's book of nature.

Chapter 6 explores the issue of transcendental arguments, or more specifically, the transcendental argument for the existence of God (TAG). Theologians devoted to Van Tillian apologetics tout the Copernican nature of his contribution through his introducing the TAG, which some claim is the most biblical form of argumentation. In the simplest terms, one argues from the impossibility of the contrary. Only presupposing the existence of the God of the Bible adequately explains all reality. But the TAG has its origins in idealist philosophy and is wedded to HWT. This does not mean that the TAG is therefore automatically unbiblical or should be cast aside. Van Til promoted the use of the TAG in conjunction with the use of evidence, even the traditional proofs for the existence of God, but some Van Tillians have shied away from or even rejected the use of evidence. The degree to which apologists employ the TAG apart from appeal to the book of nature is the level to which they part ways with historic Reformed theology or reveal their ignorance of its history. The TAG can be a useful argument in the apologist's toolbox, but not at the cost of the depreciation or neglect of the book of nature. At the heart

of this chapter is the importance of recognizing that some proponents of the TAG have unduly emphasized the coherence theory of truth at the expense of the correspondence theory. Truth must not only systematically cohere with reality but must also correspond to it. In other words, our claims about God and the Bible must correspond to the world around us. Or we can say that the books of Scripture and nature speak with one voice, and thus we can and must appeal to both in our efforts to defend the faith. Any argument that discourages appeal to the book of nature should be rejected.

Chapter 7 addresses one of the most common objections against historic Reformed theology, namely, the accusation of being dualistic. Efforts to *distinguish* between earthly and heavenly knowledge or to acknowledge that grace presupposes nature invite accusations that Reformed theologians adopted scholasticism and the nature-grace dualism. This chapter therefore primarily interacts with the claims of Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977) and demonstrates that to distinguish between nature and grace and acknowledge the natural and spiritual realms—or in this case that there are two books, nature and Scripture—does not introduce a dualism of any kind. Rather, Dooyeweerd's arguments rest on an inaccurate historical-theological foundation, a failure to recognize the difference between *separations* and *distinctions*. Appealing to natural law or common grace in the process of defending the faith does not introduce a pagan dualism but simply means the apologist reads the book of nature in conjunction with the book of Scripture.

The final chapter (8) transitions from hurdling potential objections to sketching out how one can employ the book of nature in defending the faith. This chapter is not programmatic or comprehensive but is merely an outline demonstrating how the books of nature and Scripture can work together in apologetics. I address matters of epistemology (how we know) in the prefall and postfall world within the framework of classic Reformed covenant theology and demonstrate the aims of a covenant epistemology, namely, love and eschatology. I also explore the goals of apologetics, starting points, the points of contact that exist between believers and unbelievers, and the importance of the use of evidence in the defense of Christianity. This chapter shows that, as important as the book of Scripture is, Christians should also use the book of nature. And rather than make claims about exhaustive knowledge of the world, we must always seek the wisdom of Christ and present the truth to unbelievers in humility.

Due to a number of factors, including the influence of idealism on theological methodology, comprehensive views of life and the world, and taking

Scripture as the only starting point for all knowledge, the book of nature has been displaced or even set aside in some cases. While the book of Scripture must always take priority in the Christian life and doctrine, Christians can and should appeal to God's beautiful book of nature. We can appeal to the innate (common notions) and acquired natural knowledge (the world) of God in concert with Scripture. As Herman Bavinck once noted, "Man must be twice converted, first from the natural to the spiritual life, and then from the spiritual to the natural."[14] Despite contemporary aversions to natural theology, historic Reformed theology made regular and frequent use of the book of nature, and the present volume aims to recover it for apologetics. Why should Christians tie one hand behind their backs and use only one of God's two books? The books of nature and of Scripture are not enemies, nor does the book of nature belong on the list of banned books. Rather, we should read both books—perusing their pages, noting how they speak with one voice, and recognizing that the book of nature shouts out that God exists and proclaims his power and might, that he created the world, and that he made human beings in his image and inscribed his law upon their hearts. Even though these truths do not mention the gospel and the redemption that comes only through Christ, they nevertheless testify to the points of contact with unbelievers and thus have the greatest necessity and utility in the process of defending the faith.

14. Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 242.

1

The Light of Nature

> Lay aside Reason at first and then receive truths by Faith; and afterwards improve them by Reason, and it will excellently help.
>
> Anthony Burgess, Westminster Divine

> The Book of Scripture without doubt hath preeminence in worth by many degrees; but that of the creatures had the precedency, and was extant long before the written word.
>
> John Arrowsmith, Westminster Divine

The Westminster Confession (1647) begins with the statement "Although the light of Nature, and the works of Creation and Providence do so farre manifest the Goodnesse, Wisdome, and Power of God, as to leave men unexcusable yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God and of his Will, which is necessary unto salvation" (1.1).[1] What precisely do the divines intend by the term *light of nature*? One recent commentary on the Confession claims that the opening statement refers to one of two categories, namely, general and special revelation, or the books of nature and Scripture, and only briefly touches on the issue of humanity's natural understanding of the book of nature.[2] Two other commentaries bypass the statement altogether and deal

1. *The Humble Advice of the Assembly of Divines, Now by Authority of Parliament Sitting at Westminster, concerning a Confession of Faith* (London: Company of Stationers, 1647).

2. John H. Gerstner, Douglas F. Kelly, and Philip B. Rollinson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Guide* (Signal Mountain, TN: Summertown Texts, 1992), 1.

entirely with Scripture as special revelation.[3] Older nineteenth-century commentaries, however, devote more attention to the issue of the light of nature and explain it by the claim "God may be discovered by the light of nature, we mean that the senses and the reasoning powers, which belong to the nature of man, are able to give him so much light as to manifest that there is a God."[4] In line with this older trend, the most recent commentary on the Confession, written by Chad Van Dixhoorn, rightly notes that it begins with the doctrine of Scripture, but the first sentence deals with a different subject: the light of nature. Moreover, this commentary also explains the character of this concept: "There is the 'light of nature,' by which is meant the divine imprint which is left on each of us by our Maker. That is, we are made in God's image and even though we are fallen creatures, God's image remains stamped upon us. And there are 'the works of creation and providence.' The world that we see and the world about which we read tell us of our Creator and Provider."[5]

But even though Van Dixhoorn's analysis is correct, he only touches on the character of the light of nature. Namely, general revelation includes both the knowledge connected to the divine image and the works of creation and providence. He correctly acknowledges that the divines were following the apostle Paul's arguments in Romans 1 and 2 and statements from the psalmist (Ps. 19). But Van Dixhoorn then concludes, "In those chapters the apostle both reminds us of this general revelation and tells us that it leaves every person without an excuse before God. For this reason, both in our evangelism and in our defence of the faith, we should always remember that Christians should never be trying to prove the existence of God to unbelievers. We are reminding unbelievers of what they already know."[6] Van Dixhoorn's explanation of the Confession is generally true, but his analysis of its meaning and implication deserves deeper and more precise investigation.

Late twentieth-century Reformed theology suffered a general antipathy to any form of natural theology. Reformed theologians were content to acknowledge the existence of general revelation and its role in rendering humanity guilty of failing to worship God as they ought, but they were little interested in

3. G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Philadelphia: P&R, 1964), 3–9; Rowland S. Ward, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Study Guide* (Melbourne, Australia: New Melbourne Press, 1992), 11–18.

4. Robert Shaw, *Exposition of The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1845; repr., Fearn, UK: Christian Heritage, 1998), 36; see also A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine Expounding the Westminster Standards* (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), 26–29.

5. Chad Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith: A Reader's Guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2014), 4.

6. Van Dixhoorn, *Confessing the Faith*, 4.

assigning anything more to it. Instead, as in some of the recent commentaries on the Confession, theologians sprint for the doctrine of Scripture and hardly acknowledge the light of nature. While frequency statistics do not always reveal a doctrine's importance, the term *Trinity* occurs only twice (2.1; 8.2) whereas the term *light of nature* appears five times in the Confession (1.1, 6; 10.4; 20.4; 21.1). Since the light of nature is not simply a passing idea, we should seek a thicker account of this concept.

One of the best sources for understanding the concept of the light of nature comes from one of the Westminster divines, Anthony Burgess (d. 1664). Burgess participated in the writing of the Confession and also lectured on the subject when the divines were constructing the Confession's chapter on the law. In fact, some argue that Burgess's lectures in his *Vindiciae Legis* provide a window into understanding the intricate details that undergird the Confession's summary presentation of the law.[7] This is not to say that Burgess was the chief architect or author of chapter 19 on the law.[8] Nevertheless, the structural similarities between Burgess's lectures and the final product reveal the symbiotic relationship between the two.[9] Hence, an examination of Burgess's lectures on the law provides a primary-source explanation of what the Westminster divines intend by the term *light of nature*. Through the use of Burgess's lectures, this chapter demonstrates that the light of nature denotes three things: (1) natural law, (2) human reason, and (3) God's natural revelation in creation. In short, the light of nature denotes the book or order of nature written and designed by God—an important tool in defending the Christian faith, a tool forgotten by many in contemporary Reformed theology but regularly used by early modern Reformed theologians. In contrast to some recent analyses of the first chapter of the Confession, Burgess gives a full-throated explanation and defense of the light of nature as natural law and human reason.

Natural Law

In his explanation of the law, Burgess devotes five lectures to the exegetical and theological exposition of Romans 2:14–15: "For when the Gentiles which know not the law, do the things of the law by nature, these having not the

7. Stephen J. Casselli, *Divine Rule Maintained: Anthony Burgess, Covenant Theology, and the Place of the Law in Reformed Scholasticism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016), 12–14.

8. Casselli, *Divine Rule Maintained*, 33.

9. Casselli, *Divine Rule Maintained*, 36.

law, are a law unto themselves: which shew the work of the law written in their hearts."[10] Early modern Reformed theologians connected the *light of nature* with the natural-law concept of *common notions*. John Downame (1571–1652), for example, writes: "But the combat of conscience doth begin oftentimes long before conversion, even as soone as we have the use of reason and understanding, receiving common notions from the light of Nature."[11] Here Downame writes of the common notions *and* the light of nature, but elsewhere he speaks of the "common notions of the light of Nature."[12] Similar terminology appears in Pierre Du Moulin (1568–1658); he connects common notions with "natural light" and a "generall knowledge of the law."[13] The Confession itself uses the term *law of nature* in parallel with a similar term *light of nature* (21.1). A clear confessional witness to the connections between the light of nature and common notions appears in the Canons of Dordt (1618–19):

> There is, to be sure, a certain light of nature remaining in man after the fall, by virtue of which he retains some notions about God, natural things, and the difference between what is moral and immoral, and demonstrates a certain eagerness for virtue and for good outward behavior. But this light of nature is far from enabling man to come to a saving knowledge of God and conversion to him—so far, in fact, that man does not use it rightly even in matters of nature and society. Instead, in various ways he completely distorts this light, whatever its precise character, and suppresses it in unrighteousness. In doing so he renders himself without excuse before God.[14]

10. Anthony Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis: A Vindication of the Morall Law and the Covenants* (London: Thomas Underhill, 1647), 57.

11. John Downame, *The Christian Warfare against the Devill, World and Flesh Wherein Is Described Their Nature, the Maner of Their Fight and Meanes to Obtaine Victorye* (London: William Stansby, 1634), 2.8.9, p. 1107.

12. Downame, *Christian Warfare*, 2.9.6, p. 1110.

13. Pierre Du Moulin, *The Anatomy of Arminianisme* (London: Nathaniel Newbery, 1620), 26.13, p. 215.

14. Canons of Dordt, III/IV art. 4. The Synod commissioned a commentary on the whole Bible: Theodore Haak, *The Dutch Annotations upon the Whole Bible* (1637; London: Henry Hills, 1657). Note *Annotations*, comm. Rom. 1:19, which states: "[Namely, as much as a man can know of God, without Gods words, by nature] . . . i.e., among their wise and learned men, who have left very many cleer and wise sentences and discourses hereof in their writings, although they themselves did contrary thereunto, . . . partly by the Law of nature in their consciences, . . . partly by beholding of Gods creatures, whereby his properties are as it were felt, Ps. 19:2 and 148:4–6; Acts 14:15 and 17:24, etc." Likewise, Haak identifies the written law with nature and the "work of the law" written on the heart as having the contents of God's law (Haak, *Annotations*, comm. Rom. 2:14–15). Three delegates to the Synod also wrote a summary work of theology, the fruit of the disputation cycles at the University of Leiden. They provide a fuller explanation of the concept of common notions: *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae / Synopsis of a*

The Canons refer to the "light of nature" and "notions about God, natural things, and the difference between what is moral and immoral," which are common notions. The Synod limits the function of common notions, which are nonsaving and subject to the noetic effects of sin. But what, exactly, are common notions?

Burgess writes: "The Law of Nature consists in those common notions which are ingrafted in all men's hearts." These include belief in the existence of God and a general knowledge of the difference between good and evil. At this point Burgess positively invokes Thomas Aquinas's (1225–74) treatment of natural law to substantiate his point: "*Aquinas* saith well, that *what principles of Sciences are in things of demonstration, the same are these rules of nature in practicals*: therefore we cannot give any reasons of them; but, as the Sun manifests it selfe by its owne light, so doe these."[15] In other words, common notions do not require proof because they are self-evident. Burgess further explains this point by citing Chrysostom (ca. 349–407), who argues that God forbids murder and other sins apart from a specific rationale: "Thou shalt not kill" (Exod. 20:13 KJV). By way of contrast, when he enjoins the Sabbath upon Israel, he provides a reason: "For the Lord . . . rested on the seventh day" (Exod. 20:11 KJV). The Sabbath command is moral, but it is not a naturally revealed command but a moral positive command.[16]

Burgess is well aware of the questions that would immediately follow. How do common notions function before and after the fall? Burgess acknowledges that there are certainly prefall and postfall differences in how common notions function. In the prefall context, these laws were perfectly implanted in Adam's heart, but now, in a postfall world, human beings have only residual fragments of them.[17] Yet even though Burgess uses negative language to describe the postfall state of common notions, he does not completely eradicate the idea from his postfall anthropology. There were some, such as Lutheran theologian Matthias Flacius Illyricus (1520–75), who argued that God de novo infuses common notions into human beings when he regenerates them. He

Purer Theology, ed. Dolf te Velde et al., trans. Riemer A. Faber, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2014), disp. 18; see also Donald Sinnema and Henk van den Belt, "The *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* (1625) as a Disputation Cycle," *Church History and Religious Culture* 92, no. 4 (2012): 505–37.

15. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 62; cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (repr., Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1948), Ia-IIae q. 94 art. 2. For an overview of Aquinas on natural law, see Michael Baur, "Law and Natural Law," *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 238–54; Clifford G. Kossel, "Natural Law and Human Law (Ia IIae, qq. 90–97)," in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 169–93.

16. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 62.

17. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 62.

held this view because he wanted to demonstrate how original sin completely eviscerated God's image in fallen human beings. In fact, Illyricus believed humans bore the image of Satan, not God, as a consequence of the fall, a position confessionally rejected by the Lutheran churches in the Formula of Concord (1577).[18] Burgess also mentions "a godly man, in his Book of *Temptations*," who holds the same view.[19] Burgess, therefore, rejected Illyricus's idea that the fall completely obliterated common notions from the human heart.

Burgess does acknowledge, however, the difficulty of determining the precise boundaries of the law of nature. There are four opinions regarding where these boundaries lie:

1. *The general principles in which man and beast agree, such as self-defense and the desire for life*. Burgess rejects this version because it excludes ethical categories such as honesty and righteousness. Beasts are incapable of sin and obligation to the law. This view was held by ancient Roman jurists.[20]
2. *The general custom of the nations, or* ius Gentium. Burgess rejects this claim because not all people agree on what, precisely, constitutes a vice or a virtue. This was the view of Isidore of Seville (ca. 560–636).[21]
3. *The reason in every person*. This too is uncertain because people disagree on many ethical questions.
4. *The will of God declared to Noah in seven precepts and later to Moses in the Decalogue*. Burgess objects because the law of nature thus extends from first principles to deduced conclusions.[22] This was the view of rabbinic scholars.[23]

Instead of these four opinions, Burgess opts for identifying the law of nature as it is revealed in the moral law delivered by Moses at Sinai. But he quickly

18. Matthias Flacius Illyricus, *De Peccati Originalis aut Veteris Adami Appellationibus et Essentia*, in *Clavis Scripturae S. seu Sermone Sacrarum Literarum* ([Basel]: Eusebius Episcopius, 1580), 370; see also Robert C. Schultz, "Original Sin: Accident or Substance—the Paradoxical Significance of FC I, 53–62 in Historical Context," in *Discord, Dialogue, and Concord: Studies in the Lutheran Reformation's Formula of Concord*, ed. Lewis W. Spitz and Wenzel Lohff (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 38–57.

19. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 63.

20. Justinian, *Justinian's Institutes*, trans. Peter Birks and Grant McLeod (London: Duckworth, 1987), 1.2, pp. 38–39.

21. Isidore, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 5.4, p. 117.

22. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 62–63.

23. David Novak, *Natural Law in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 149–67. In the early modern period, see, e.g., John Selden, *De Successionibus in Bona Defuncti ad Leges Ebraerorum* (London: Richard Bishop, 1636).

points out that there are differences between the law of nature and the Decalogue. One of the most significant differences is that God reveals one to the conscience and the other through the written law, the Torah.[24] Burgess does not believe that the light of nature can sufficiently instruct people for proper worship or provide knowledge sufficient for salvation. Nevertheless, the law of nature provides reproof for evil conduct. "Doth not Nature," writes Burgess, "condemne lying, couzening in your trades, lusts, and uncleannesse?" Burgess appeals to Cicero (106–43 BC) and his *On Obligations* to show that unbelievers condemn deception and unlawful gain.[25]

At this point Burgess's explanation of common notions provides a robust account of two of the Confession's uses of the term *light of nature*. The Confession identifies the light of nature as one of the means by which Christians can determine whether or not their use of Christian liberty is moral or immoral: "They, who upon pretence of Christian Liberty, shall oppose any lawfull Power, or the lawfull exercise of it, whether it bee Civil or Ecclesiasticall, resist the Ordinance of God. And, for their publishing of such Opinions, or maintaining of such Practices, as are contrary to the light of Nature, or to the known Principles of Christianity" (20.4). The divines believed, therefore, that a Christian should not use his Christ-bought liberty to violate the moral law and that two guardrails against doing so were naturally revealed law and supernaturally revealed law, or common notions and Scripture. Noteworthy is that the divines appeal to 1 Corinthians 5:1: "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife" (KJV). In other words, not only did Scripture prohibit such sexual immorality (Lev. 18:8), but so did natural law, the common notions that pagans had by virtue of the divinely heart-inscribed works of the law. The assembly's commentary on Scripture explains the significance of Paul's statement and the Confession's rationale for appealing to common notions: "The sin was incest, forbidden, Levit. 18:8. *The nakedness of thy fathers wife shalt thou not uncover*; an horrible crime, and such as the very Gentiles detested, and severely punished in their laws, if any among them (which seldom fell out) defiled themselves with any such unnatural contract, or abominable act."[26]

Such conclusions were common among Reformed theologians. French Reformed theologian Lambert Daneau (ca. 1535–ca. 1590), for example, appealed

24. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 65.

25. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 66; see, e.g., Cicero, *De Officiis* (*On Duties*), trans. Walter Miller, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913), 1.10.33, p. 35.

26. *Annotations upon All the Books of the Old and New Testament*, 3rd ed. (London: Evan Tyler, 1657), comm. 1 Cor. 5:1.

to the light of nature to explain why the Gentile sailors on Jonah's doomed voyage were fearful and cried out to their respective gods: "That men by the light of nature are taught sufficiently that there is a god, and that he is the governour of this world, and that he is the author & giver of life, and other good things unto us: but who he is they are ignorant, who have not learned it out of his word."[27] In Daneau's judgment, the light of nature included the "testimony or witness of conscience," which was present in both the believer and unbeliever and enabled them to discern the difference between good and evil.[28] Daneau offers a full-fledged explanation of the character and boundaries of the light of nature:

> For all men by the remnants of the light of nature which is in them, far generally knowe, that God is both just, and also merciful: that which his government of the worlde, and experience it selfe doeth prove: but yet all this notwithstanding they neither know the foundation, nor yet the force both of this justice, and also mercy of God, as namely being infidels, the which nevertheless the faithful far understand, being taught both by the word of God and also by the holy ghost. We have therefore seen before both in the mariners, and also in the Ninevites themselves, what manner of common knowledge there is in all men, yea, even in the infidels concerning the righteousness of God, to wit, that he is just, and a punisher of wickedness: so also this is a common principle engrafted in the hearts of all men, that God likewise is merciful and loving. But both these knowledges far far differ from that, which the godly and the faithful have concerning both these properties and virtues of God, out of his word, and by the feeling and sweetness of a true faith.[29]

The light of nature, therefore, includes common knowledge among believer and unbeliever that binds them to the same moral standards but leaves the unbeliever far short of true faith and saving knowledge.

That natural law was suitable for determining questions of morality even among unbelievers did not mean that it provided a foundation on which to construct a tower to heaven. The Westminster divines recognized that the light of nature was the means by which people might be "never so diligent to frame their lives" but that such moral conduct fell far short of the required

27. Lambert Daneau, *A Fruitfull Commentarie upon the Twelve Small Prophets* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge, 1594), comm. Jon. 1:5, p. 95. In general, see Daneau, *The Wonderfull Woorkmanship of the World: Wherein Is Conteined An Excellent Discourse of Christian Naturall Philosophie* (London: Andrew Maunsell, 1578).

28. Daneau, *Fruitfull Commentarie*, comm. Jon. 1:10, p. 102. So also Dudley Fenner, *The Sacred Doctrine of Divinitie* (London: Felix Kyngston, 1613), 10; William Twisse, *A Discovery of D. Jackson's Vanity* (Amsterdam, 1631), 455.

29. Daneau, *Fruitful Commentarie*, comm. Jon. 3:9, pp. 201–2.

supernatural regenerative work of the Spirit (10.4; cf. WLC q. 60). Burgess confirms this interpretation in his lectures when he acknowledges that the light of nature instigates and provokes people to morally good actions toward God and man. And in fact, pagans have written wholesome laws by means of the light of nature. In support of this claim Burgess cites Scripture and the testimony of pagan philosophers.[30] Burgess appeals to Scripture and the time when pagan Jethro advised Moses concerning the best and most sagacious way to rule Israel during the nation's journey in the wilderness. Burgess again cites Chrysostom to make his point: "*That great Man* Moses (saith he) *who was so potent in words and workes*, *who was the friend of God*, *which commanded the creatures*, *was helped in counsell by* Jethro *his father-in-law*, *an obscure man*, *and a Barbarian*."[31] Burgess appeals to several pagan philosophers to prove his point, including Aristotle (384–322 BC), Plato (ca. 428–348 BC), and Seneca (4 BC–AD 65).[32]

Burgess appealed to Aristotle to prove that reason was a prisoner, bound by the chains of lust and sinful affections, which the peripatetic philosopher manifested in his own life. Aristotle knew what was good but nevertheless pursued pleasure or profit instead of virtue. Despite his pursuit of pleasure, Aristotle knew that the better part of the mind sought better things, that is, what was morally right. Plato similarly had knowledge of the one true God, argues Burgess, but he did not communicate it to the common person.[33] Burgess also appeals to Seneca through a citation of Augustine's (354–430) *City of God*, where Augustine explains that Seneca kept the truth in unrighteousness: "That liberty, in truth, which [Varro] wanted, so that he did not dare to censure that theology of the city . . . in part possessed by Annaeus Seneca. . . . It was in part possessed by him, I say, for he possessed it in writing, but not in living."[34] In particular, the reason Burgess cites Augustine's analysis of Seneca is because Seneca condemned idolatry: "They dedicate images of the sacred and inviolable immortals in most worthless and motionless

30. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 68–69.

31. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 68; see Chrysostom, *Homilies on Second Corinthians* 18 (*NPNF*[1] 12:366–67).

32. At this point in church history some believed Seneca corresponded with the apostle Paul; see Pseudo-Seneca, "The Correspondence of Paul and Seneca," in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, trans. M. R. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon, 1924).

33. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 68. Here Burgess likely employs a commonly used set of references to make his point, as the same citations to Plato, Augustine, and Seneca appear in John Flavel (ca. 1627–91), *The Method of Grace*, in *The Whole Works of the Reverend Mr. John Flavel*, 2 vols. (London: D. Midwinter et al., 1740), 1:408. It is also possible that Flavel relied on Burgess for his citations of the same authorities.

34. Augustine, *City of God* 6.10 (*NPNF*[1] 2:119).

matter. They give them the appearance of man, beasts, and fishes, and some make them of mixed sex, and heterogeneous bodies. They call them deities, when they are such that if they should get breath and should suddenly meet them, they would be held to be monsters."[35]

Burgess interacts with Augustine's quotation of Seneca because it applies to both pagan and "Popish" idolatry, but at the same time Burgess follows Augustine, who castigates the philosopher for his failure to follow his own counsel:

> But this man, who philosophy had made, as it were, free, nevertheless, because he was an illustrious senator of the Roman people, worshipped what he censured, did what he condemned, adored what he reproached, because, forsooth, philosophy had taught him something great—namely, not to be superstitious in the world, but, on account of the laws of cities and the customs of men, to be an actor, not on the stage, but in the temples—conduct the more to be condemned, that those things which he was deceitfully acting he so acted that the people thought he was acting sincerely.[36]

Burgess summarizes his point when he explains that the light of nature inclines the heart to what is objectively good and shows what it should desire, but he also adds: "Not that we have any strength naturally to what is good."[37]

Human Reason

Burgess places other ideas under the rubric of the light of nature. In particular, he devotes a considerable amount of space to explaining how the light of nature included human reason. Burgess is fully aware of the noetic effects of sin and recognizes that only a sovereign act of God's Spirit enables natural man to accept the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14). Natural man, according to Burgess, is not someone engaged in carnal or gross sin but rather a pagan such as Cicero or Aristotle. Burgess believes that three things obscure the light of nature: (1) poor education, (2) old customs and degeneration, and (3) God's just judgment (Rom. 1:24–32).[38] But that reason was corrupted by sin does not mean that reason should therefore be rejected. Burgess sees several functions of reason for unregenerate and regenerate humanity.

35. Augustine, *City of God* 6.10 (*NPNF*[1] 2:119).
36. Augustine, *City of God* 6.10 (*NPNF*[1] 2:120).
37. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 69–70.
38. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 71.

First, the light of nature renders people inexcusable before the divine bar, as Paul states in Romans 1:20.[39] This point aligns with the Confession's first reference to the light of nature in its opening statement: "Although the light of Nature . . . so farre manifest the Goodnesse, Wisdome, and Power of God, as to leave men unexcusable" (1.1). Second, Burgess believes that the light of nature, or reason, is of use to the regenerate when enlightened by God's word. "Lay aside Reason at first," writes Burgess, "and then receive truths by Faith; and afterwards improve them by Reason, and it will excellently help." Burgess echoes the ancient principle that goes back to Augustine, namely, faith seeking understanding.[40] Burgess likens reason to Hagar, Sarah's handmaid, and counsels his readers not to cast her out.[41] In fact, Burgess agrees with Roman Catholic Franciscan theologian Diego Estella (1524–78) and quotes him as saying, "It is with Faith and Reason, as with the mould that is at the root of the barren and fruitlesse tree; take the mould out, and throw in muck or other compost, and then put the mould in, it will much help the tree, which hindered it before."[42] When reason is sanctified by the Spirit, it becomes a useful tool for the better comprehension of Scripture.

But a third role for reason is in religious and moral matters—that is, in God's work of salvation. At first blush, such a role for reason might appear to overthrow all that Burgess has argued thus far. Yet Burgess is very precise in the way he accounts for the role of reason in salvation. Burgess argues that the light of nature is the "residue of the glorious image of God," and as such is absolutely necessary in two ways: (1) as a passive qualification for saving faith, and (2) as an instrument. Burgess explains these two uses of the light of nature in the following manner. Stones are incapable of reason and do not bear the image of God: "Therefore Reason, or the light of Nature, makes man in a passive capacity fit for grace; although he hath no active ability for it."[43] Burgess does not appeal to the category but likely has in mind the common threefold doctrine of faith, which consists of *notitia* (the facts), *assensus* (comprehension), and *fiducia* (trust).[44] Fallen human beings are incapable of

39. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 70.

40. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, Fathers of the Church 88 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 29.6, pp. 17–19.

41. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 71. The use of Sarah and Hagar as faith and reason goes back at least to Clement of Alexandria; see his *Stromata* 1.5 (*ANF* 2:305–6).

42. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 71.

43. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 72.

44. See, e.g., Guillaume Bucanus, *Institutiones Theologicae* (Geneva: Jacob Stoer, 1625), 29.7, p. 276; Bucanus, *Body of Divinity, or Institutions of Christian Religion* (London: Daniel Pakeman et al., 1659), 328–30; Zacharias Ursinus, *Corpus Doctrinae Orthodoxae* (Heidelberg: Jonah Rodius, 1616), 108; Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg*

embracing Christ in a saving manner by the power of unaided reason. There is no governing role for reason in accepting the person and work of Christ. On the other hand, when someone presents the truth of the gospel, the recipient must have a rational comprehension of the facts and what those facts mean. In this sense, reason has a role in salvation. Burgess makes this very point when he discusses the instrumental role of reason: "For we cannot beleeve, unlesse we understand whether knowledge be an act ingredient into the essence of faith, or whether it be prerequisite: all hold there must be an act of the understanding, one way or other, going to beleeve. Hence knowledge is put for faith, and *Hebr. 11. By faith we understand*. Thus it is necessary as an instrument."[45] Or in the words of Zacharias Ursinus (1534–83), "It is proper for us, therefore, to obtain a knowledge of that in which we are to believe, before we exercise faith."[46]

Burgess is acutely aware of the potential for misunderstanding his claim regarding the role of reason in salvation. He carefully demarcates the boundaries between the role of reason and the necessity of the Spirit's sovereign work of regeneration, as does the Confession and its use of the light of nature (1.1; 10.4). Burgess notes, for example, that there are certain things known both by reason and faith, but in different ways. The devils believe God is one, for example, by "an evident intuitive knowledge of God, and feel it by experience; not that they have faith, for that is a supernaturall gift wrought by God, and hath accompanying it *pia affectio*, to him that speaketh, as the first truth."[47] Burgess distinguishes his own view from the Lutherans, who diminish fallen reason too much, and the Socinians, who attribute greater power to it than they ought. Burgess gladly acknowledges that excellent men have demonstrated the truth of Christianity by reason, and "we may by the same Reason prove that the Christian Religion is the true one." But how can we compare bald reason to faith? Burgess rejects, therefore, the views of Anglican theologian William Chillingworth (1602–44), whom Burgess quotes as follows, "We therefore receive the Scriptures to be the Word of God, because we have the greatest Reason that this is the Word of God." Burgess rejects this idea as a form of rationalism and warns that we must not confound the *instrument* with the *judge*. That is, Scripture provides truth and reason hammers it for greater

Catechism (Columbus, 1852; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 110–11; Francis Turretin, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* (Geneva: Samuel de Tournes, 1688), 15.12.11; Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992–97); see Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), s.v. *notitia* (235), *assensus* (42–43), *fiducia* (123).

45. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 72.

46. Ursinus, *Commentary*, 110.

47. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 73.

understanding: "As the Smith that takes that Golden plate, and beates it into what shape he pleaseth, his hammer doth not make it gold, but only gold of such a shape: And thus also Reason doth not make a truth divine, only holds it forth, and declareth it in such a way."[48] Burgess believes that reason still has an important role to play, but at the same time he carefully demarcates its boundaries: "Let us then follow the light of Nature no further than we ought; let her be an hand-maid, not a mistresse. And then we must take heed of going against her where she doth truly direct."[49]

Burgess is not alone in his understanding of the role and function of the light of nature, as similar views appear in another Westminster divine, John Arrowsmith (1602–59). In his *Armilla Catechetica* (1659), Arrowsmith explains that there are three types of knowledge of God: natural, literal, and spiritual.[50] The natural knowledge comes from the book of nature, which Arrowsmith describes in the following manner: "The Book of Scripture without doubt hath preeminence in worth by many degrees; but that of the creatures had the precedency, and was extant long before the written word." On this point, it is noteworthy that Arrowsmith appeals to Socrates (d. 399 BC) and Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who speak of the "book of all the creatures . . . to contemplate God in" and the ability to read nature, respectively.[51] Arrowsmith then delineates six ways by which people can know there is a God through the "natural light" available to them: by looking backward, forward, upward, downward, within, and without.[52]

Arrowsmith elaborates on these in the following manner, citing Scripture, pagan, and Christian authorities, including Ovid (43 BC–AD 17), Livy (59 BC–AD 17), Menander (342–290 BC), Plato, Galen (AD 129–210), Tertullian (ca. AD 155–ca. 240), Basil of Caesarea (AD 329–379), and Calvin (1509–64) to prove the legitimacy of each category:

Backward: By looking back to the creation of the world people can see and understand that God exists (Rom. 1:20).

Forward: By looking ahead to the final judgment and the rewards and punishments of the next world.

Upward: By looking up to the existence of angels and demons and tracing the effects back to the causes of evil mischief, especially.

48. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 73–74.

49. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 76.

50. John Arrowsmith, *Armilla Catechetica: A Chain of Principles* (Cambridge: John Field, 1659), 3.1, p. 111.

51. Arrowsmith, *Armilla Catechetica*, 3.1, p. 119.

52. Arrowsmith, *Armilla Catechetica*, 3.2, pp. 120–21.

Downward: By looking to things beneath humans, such as the elements, plants, and brute beasts (Ps. 19:1; Job 12:7–9).

Within: By looking within to human physiology (Ps. 139:14) as well as to the dictates of conscience.

Without: By looking around at the various events in the world, great deliverances and calamities (Ps. 9:16).[53]

In these six ways that humans can find God by the light of nature, Arrowsmith shows the wide and expansive scope of the book of creatures. Within the framework of these six ways, Arrowsmith also explains the means by which human reason can inquire after God: by way of causality (*via causalitatis*), elimination (*via remotionis*), and prominence (*via eminentiae*). But Arrowsmith clearly states that none of these ways can make a full discovery of God's essence.[54] Arrowsmith's and Burgess's understandings of the light of nature admit the same categories and have the same boundaries, and both encompass human reason, conscience (common notions), and the ability to discern the existence of God from the creation.

Conclusion

Burgess's lectures on the light of nature are more expansive than what this chapter has covered. He deals with many other related topics that merit further investigation. But this survey certainly invites the question, Why did Burgess have a greater conception of the light of nature than his twentieth-century counterparts do? There are several brief answers to this question. First, in the middle of the seventeenth century, philosophers such as John Locke (1632–1704) rejected the idea of common notions.[55] In the twentieth century, this rejection made its way to liberal and conservative Reformed theologians alike, including Karl Barth (1886–1968) and Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987).[56] Historians and theologians in the twentieth century believed that natural law was an unwanted post-Reformation cancerous wart that grew

53. Arrowsmith, *Armilla Catechetica*, 3.1–2, pp. 121–27.

54. Arrowsmith, *Armilla Catechetica*, 3.3, pp. 129–30.

55. John Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature*, ed. W. von Leyden (Oxford: Clarendon, 2002), 137–45, 161–79; see also Arthur F. McGovern, "John Locke on Knowledge of the Natural Law" (master's thesis, Loyola University, 1958), 18–51.

56. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), IV/1:369–72; see also Rinse H. Reeling, *Karl Barth and Post-Reformation Orthodoxy* (London: Routledge, 2015), 88; Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1967), 160–78, esp. 168–69.

on the otherwise beautiful face of Reformed theology. In this vein, a number of twentieth-century theologians tried to pit Calvin against the so-called Calvinists by arguing that natural law was an outlier in the Genevan's theology that his disciples wrongly exaggerated and employed.[57] Recent scholarship has ably dismantled this fictional narrative.[58] The later chapter on Calvin delves into these matters in greater detail.

Second, twentieth-century theologians ceased to recognize natural revelation as an ontological aspect of anthropology and more or less located it strictly in the created world. While Burgess would heartily agree that God reveals himself in the world, he at the same time believed that common notions, or the light of nature, were a remnant of God's image: "The image of God did primarily consist in righteousness and true holinesse; yet secondarily it did also comprehend the powers and faculties of the reasonable soule in the acts thereof."[59] On this point, Burgess appealed to Romans 1, especially 1:19–20, and the fact that Paul acknowledges that fallen humanity possesses the truth.[60]

Third, twentieth-century Reformed theologians and philosophers identified common notions (or the light of nature) and the use of reason in theology with Roman Catholicism. Such is the case with August Lang's essay on the Reformation and natural law, Herman Dooyeweerd's (1894–1977) assessment of Reformed scholastic theology, and Van Til's evaluation of common notions, as we will see in subsequent chapters. In their efforts to saw off a perceived diseased branch, they also cut off the perch on which Burgess and the Westminster Confession sat. What these scholars believed was rotten Roman Catholic theology was instead part of the common catholic heritage that stretched back through Aquinas to Augustine and the apostle Paul. This is evident by Burgess's positive quotation of Aquinas. Paul wrote of the Gentiles who did by nature what the law required because they had the works of the law written on their hearts, and Reformed theologians like Burgess and others confirmed their exegetical conclusions when they explored the works of pagan philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, and Cicero. But as classical learning fell under the scorn of historians and theologians, they ceased to cite these ancient authorities. Theologians removed foundation stones that eventually caused the wall of natural law and reason to collapse.

57. See, e.g., August Lang, "The Reformation and Natural Law," in *Calvin and the Reformation*, trans. J. Gresham Machen (New York: Revell, 1927), 56–98.

58. See David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 67–115; Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 70–97.

59. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 67.

60. Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 68.

Twentieth-century commentators on the Confession, therefore, ignore or reject what Reformed theologians once thought was an integral part of their system of doctrine.

In the end, this brief exploration of Burgess's lectures demonstrates that the light of nature was more than the revelatory testimony of the created world. Moreover, the light of nature had a greater function than merely rendering fallen humanity inexcusable before the divine bar of judgment. The light of nature certainly incorporates these two elements but also includes the subjects of natural law and human reason. Natural law is a vital part of the image of God, even though it has been ravaged by the noetic effects of sin. Reason also had a role to play in a person's salvation, albeit a passive role, but a role nonetheless. When our eyes pass over the term *light of nature* in the Westminster Confession, we should recognize that more is present than first meets the eye. We must also not automatically assume that contemporary expositions of the Westminster Confession accurately or exhaustively unpack its teachings. The church must patiently revisit the works of the early modern period so that the fresh breeze of the centuries reminds us of forgotten truth, which allows us to refine and expand our own understanding of the Westminster Confession of Faith. With a better understanding of the light of nature, we reacquire an important tool for our apologetics toolbox. But we must first explore the topic of common notions in greater detail so that we have a better understanding of how this concept functioned in early modern Reformed theology. By retrieving the idea of common notions, we add yet another useful tool to our defense of the faith. We rediscover the importance of the book of nature and its utility in our interaction with the unbelieving world.