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NATURAL THEOLOGY IN LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty  
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,  
Department of Systematic Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Divinity

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by

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE PROBLEM OF NATURAL THEOLOGY

One of the doctrines of the Lutheran Church that has been commented on pretty frequently of late in conservative Lutheran theological literature is the doctrine of the Natural Knowledge of God (Notitia Dei Naturalis.) These comments, in the main, have been occasioned by the doubt that some theologians have cast upon this doctrine and by its outright rejection by others. One writer comments, for example:

More than once in the course of the last few years we have found it necessary to warn against theological opinions which . . . have tried to weaken the concept of theologia naturalis or to banish it from Lutheran theology altogether . . . .<sup>1</sup>

Another writer, who is quoted in the same article, is even more outspoken when he says: "The denial of every form of theologia naturalis . . . is current today also in Lutheran theology . . . ." <sup>2</sup>

It is, of course, not only in recent times that the doctrines of the Natural Knowledge of God and of the Divine Law have been the subject of debate and criticism within the

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<sup>1</sup>H. Hamann, "The Natural Knowledge of God (Theologia Naturalis) Upheld," Australian Theological Review, XXIV (March--June, 1953), p. 34.

<sup>2</sup>Helmut Echterbach, quoted by H. Hamann, Ibid.

Lutheran Church. Dr. Pieper has pointed out how the older Lutheran theologians "spared neither friend nor foe" in vigorously condemning those who denied or misinterpreted this doctrine in their times, and in this connexion quotes John Gerhard, who, in his Loci, under De Natura Dei, lists those who erred in defectu and in excessu in teaching the doctrine.<sup>3</sup> Neither has this so-called "Problem of Natural Theology," as Jaroslav Pelikan calls it,<sup>4</sup> been restricted to within the Lutheran Church, for this writer holds that, "the past century in the history of Protestant theology has seen a heightening of the concern with 'natural theology';<sup>5</sup> and Robert Hoferkamp writing in 1952 says:

The present-day ecumenical movement is wrestling with the problem of international disorder. This discussion inevitably leads the various churches to consider the question of Natural Law, the Biblical basis for Natural Law, and the responsibility of the Church to proclaim the Natural Law to a modern distraught world. In fact, this evaluation of the Biblical and theological basis for Natural Law is one of the most crucial areas of debate in the current ecumenical discussions.<sup>6</sup>

While it is not our purpose within the limited compass

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<sup>3</sup>Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 1, p.376.

<sup>4</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, From Luther to Kierkegaard (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), p.21.

<sup>5</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, "Natural Theology in David Hollaz," Concordia Theological Monthly, XVIII (April, 1947), p. 253.

<sup>6</sup>Robert Hoferkamp, "Natural Law and the New Testament," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXIII (September, 1952 ), p. 649.

of this paper to gather together the various philosophical and theological opinions of the past and the present held by those who doubt or reject the validity of the doctrine in question, it will be necessary briefly to refer to some of the most important of these opinions inasmuch as they have some bearing on shaping the attitude of some Lutheran theologians of more recent times in regard to the matter of Natural Theology and Natural Law. First, there is the position of the philosopher, Immanuel Kant, who, "not only dominated the philosophical schools for decades, but also affected at least a generation of theologians commonly considered Lutheran."<sup>7</sup> Dr. Hamann has summarized Kant's position thus:

Kant, in the work which is usually regarded as his greatest, viz., the Critique of Pure Reason, denied the possibility of proving the existence of God, and demolished to his satisfaction and that of many others the proofs commonly adduced for the existence of God, the ontological, the cosmological, and the physio-teleological demonstrations . . . . Kant comes to the conclusion that the super-sensuous or the super-phenomenal is beyond human cognition or knowledge; hence neither the world as the sum of all phenomena, nor the soul as a thinking entity, nor God as the supreme cause of all possible existence, is demonstrable by logical, rational processes of thought.<sup>8</sup>

However, in his second great work, Critique of Practical Reason, Kant vindicated the existence of God as a postulate

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<sup>7</sup>H. Hamann, "Kant, Heine, and Theology on the Proofs for the Existence of God," Australian Theological Review, XXIII (September, 1952), p. 53.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 53.

of practical reason. Thus Kant arrived at the conclusion that the freedom of the will, the immortality of the soul, the existence of God, are not theoretical dogmas, but practical postulates. Dr. Hamann, therefore, shows how Kant apparently contradicts himself because,

Kant by a mental process denies the possibility of proving the existence of God, and then by a mental process establishes the existence of God as a postulate, that is, as something claimed or assumed as true.<sup>9</sup>

Kant has been regarded here and there in Lutheran circles as one who, by helping Lutheran theology to rid itself of Aristotelianism, has rendered it a great service.<sup>10</sup> That at least seems to be the view of Jaroslav Pelikan, who states:

One by one, Kant's Critique does away with the elaborate proofs for the existence of God which Lutheran Aristotelianism shared with medieval scholasticism. For this fact, scholasticism has never forgiven Kant, and neither has Rationalism. But Lutheran theology can be grateful to him for freeing it from the onerous responsibility of proving, by means of reason that which is known by faith . . . .<sup>11</sup>

Over against this view on Kant, is the view of Dr. Hamann, who contends that Kantianism is a greater danger to Christian theology and faith than Aristotelianism, that the imputation of Aristotelianism itself to the work of the Lutheran theologians in question is not completely justified since it applies merely to the form and not to the content of

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<sup>9</sup>ibid., p. 54.

<sup>10</sup>ibid., p. 52.

<sup>11</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, From Luther to Kierkegaard, p. 92.

their theology, and that Kant's influence upon theology generally was far from good.<sup>12</sup> With regard to Kant's view on the existence of God he writes:

The Christian will wonder why Kant did not rather base the postulate of God upon the fact of that moral law, upon the absolute authority of which he dwells so strongly and insistently! That would have brought him, by way of his practical reason, close to the moral proof for the existence of God.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, "There is absolutely no foundation in Scripture for the argumentation or speculation by which Kant vindicated the existence of God as a postulate of practical reason."<sup>14</sup>

The second position to which we draw attention is the position of Karl Barth. According to Dr. Sasse, who devotes a chapter to the theology of Barth in his Here We Stand,<sup>15</sup> Barth rejects all notions of Natural Theology and Natural Law. Dr. Sasse writes:

On his legitimate desire to oppose the false theologia naturalis which Catholicism holds in common with modern Protestantism, and which is the principal source of false conceptions of the Christian faith, Barth launched into a violent attack not only on the theology of his former friend and associate, Emil Brunner, but also on every theology which acknowledges a revelation of God apart from the Scriptures.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>H. Hamann, Kant, Heine, and Theology on the Proofs for the Existence of God, p. 52.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 56.

<sup>15</sup>Hermann Sasse, Here We Stand: Nature and Character of the Lutheran Faith, translated from the German by Theodore G. Tappert (New York: Harper Brothers, 1938), pp. 153--170.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 157.

Robert Hoferkamp, in the article already mentioned, states Barth's position thus:

Karl Barth . . . passionately rejects all notions of natural theology and Natural Law. Out of his Christocentric dialectical theology, Barth has developed a Christian ethics growing out from the center of the Biblical message. Christ is Lord also over the world and the state. Thus the Christian Church proclaims the Lordship of Jesus to the world when it wishes to address it on ethical issues. This practical application has been worked out in Barth's much-discussed recent pamphlet Christengemeinde und Buergergemeinde.<sup>17</sup>

And anyone who has read Barth's Epistle to the Romans,<sup>18</sup> will have noted how the author, when treating the traditional loci classici for Natural Theology, Romans 1:19ff., and Natural Law, Romans 2:14ff., assiduously refrains from making any reference to the fact that these passages teach, or even are held to teach a natural knowledge of God.

Although Barth represents modern Reformed rather than Lutheran theology, yet his rejection of the theologia naturalis brings him into conflict with Lutheran and with Reformed Orthodoxy, and with the Reformers, including Luther. Dr. Sasse shows how Barth, aware of the fact that Luther and Calvin teach a natural revelation from the works of creation apart from the Scriptural revelation of God in Christ, on the one hand tries to excuse this defect, and on the other hand reproaches them for their failure to rid themselves

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<sup>17</sup>Robert Hoferkamp, op. cit., pp. 649, 650.

<sup>18</sup>Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, translated from the Sixth Edition of the German by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1950.) This is the work here referred to.

completely of Roman Thomism. According to Barth, "The Reformers did not see this question so clearly as we have come to see it today. They spoke of knowing God through nature as if it were an altogether harmless idea."<sup>19</sup> Dr. Sasse estimates the position of Barth with regard to the Reformers as follows:

Barth avoids speaking of it as a correction of the Reformers. But that is what it really is. Consequently, it is not ignorance of Thomas so much as it is a false exposition of the pertinent passages of Scripture which led Luther and Calvin astray. And so the significance of the Barthian theology lies in its exposure of a fatal error of the Reformation and in its program for completing the Reformation in this important point of doctrine.<sup>20</sup>

Barth's theology, unfortunately rather than fortunately, has not ceased to affect the entire Protestant world of our day, and its influence, also in the matter of the theologia naturalis, has not failed to win support and to have some influence upon Lutheran theology here and there.

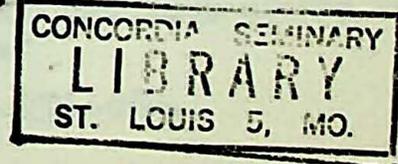
The third view to which we direct attention is held by a number of Lutherans, of whom the Swedish theologian Anders Nygren may be taken as the chief spokesman. Hoferkamp, in the article mentioned earlier draws attention to this view, which he describes as follows:

This tendency also firmly rejects any traditional concepts of natural theology and Natural Law as

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<sup>19</sup>Hermann Sasse, op. cit., p. 158.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 158.



deistic in character. It holds fast to the distinction between the Old and the New Aeons, which Barth's position seems to obliterate, and stresses that the Christian Gospel cannot control politics. These men speak of the double role of the Christian in society, although they recognize that this position, when carried to the extreme, can lead to the dangerous "compartmentalization" between Church and human life which was evident in some Lutherans in Germany during the war. Finally, the new impulses set in motion by Nygren have not yet been developed systematically.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, we mention the position apparently taken by Hoferkamp himself in regard to this problem of Natural Theology. This view does not reject Natural Theology and Natural Law as do Kant and Barth, but the historic Lutheran teaching on the doctrine is subjected to some doubt. And this doubt is occasioned not only because it is felt that the Lutheran doctrine smacks too much of philosophy, particularly of Aristotle, both in form and content,<sup>22</sup> but because it is held that the Scripture texts adduced by the Lutheran theologians to support this doctrine are not really applicable. Thus, although Robert Hoferkamp in his article, Natural Law and the New Testament,<sup>23</sup> refrains from making any clear-cut decision how he stands in the matter, it is apparent that he

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<sup>21</sup>Robert Hoferkamp, op. cit., p. 650.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 648, where reference is made to Jaroslav Pelikan, From Luther to Kierkegaard, p. 68. The relevant passage is: "What is important to note in Hollaz' entire discussion of natural theology, which is just a sample of similar discussions in almost all the prominent theologians of the Age of Orthodoxy, is the fact that not only the method, but the content and the significance of the natural knowledge of God are derived from Aristotelianism philosophy."

<sup>23</sup>Robert Hoferkamp, op. cit., pp. 632--668.

has his grave doubts whether any of the traditional loci classici, Acts 14:15--17, Acts 17:22--31, Romans 1:19--20 and Romans 2:14--16 really teach a Natural Theology and a Natural Law in the traditional notions of these terms. While more specific references to his investigation of these passages will be made later, it is sufficient to say here that Hoferkamp believes insufficient attention has been given to the contexts in which these passages occur, and that they have been made to teach more about Natural Theology and Natural Law than they do, although it is admitted that they do teach a natural revelation of God. He writes, in concluding the exegetical part of his article:

Thus the Stoic concept of Natural Law and natural theology is not to be found in Romans 1 and 2. This is not to deny with Karl Barth any revelation of God at all outside Jesus Christ. For these chapters assert emphatically that God is ever-living and active, and confronts men with His truth and His will at all times. However, these passages in Romans 1 and 2 are integral steps in the unified structure of this first great section of Romans, 1:18--3:20. Both Jews and Gentiles are under the judgment of God because they have made His revelation an intellectualistic deduction from the nature of the universe and have not understood it obediently as His word directed personally to them. . . . Thus the purpose of 1:18--3:20 is to show that it is the revelation of God in creation which condemns the whole world.<sup>24</sup>

These, then, are some of the current opinions held regarding the concept of Natural Theology. While other opinions could be cited, these are sufficient to show, first, that the doctrine of Natural Theology is, indeed, rejected by some

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 664.

and subjected to grave doubts by others in the theological world, and secondly, that the concept, "Natural Theology", is variously understood. With regard to the first matter, it is not our purpose in this paper to examine critically any one of the opinions cited, although references may be made to some of them from time to time; neither is it our intention to assess what influence any one of these opinions, or others, has exerted, or is exerting, in world Protestantism, or more particularly, in the Lutheran Church today. But since the validity of the historic Lutheran position in regard to Natural Theology has been challenged, it will be our purpose in Chapter II of this paper briefly to define that position, and then in Chapter III to examine the Scriptural foundation on which it is said to rest. This will involve a study of the relevant passages usually adduced to support the doctrine of Natural Theology, Acts 14:15--17, Acts 17:24ff., and Romans 1:18ff, and Natural Law, Romans 2:14--15. Then, in the final Chapter, some attempt will be made to evaluate the historic Lutheran position on the basis of the findings produced by this investigation.

Secondly, with regard to defining the concept "Natural Theology", it is evident, as the above opinions reveal, the term is not always used in the same sense. Hoferkamp draws attention to this when he comments:

Throughout history the theory of Natural Law has taken on many different interpretations and has been put to many different uses. The reason for this confusion in interpretation and use of Natural Law lies in the

confusion in meaning of the words "nature" and "law" and in the ambiguity involved in combining these two . . . .  
 "What natural law is at any particular time depends . . . upon who is using it and for what purpose."<sup>25</sup>

He gives his own definition as follows:

Natural Law is the tenet which posits the existence of an objective order of ethical standards of right and wrong, rooted in the nature of the universe. Men can discover this objective standard and apply it to his individual needs. A theory of Natural Law is very often associated with the belief in natural theology or natural religion, i.e., that man on his own initiative can attain knowledge of God.<sup>26</sup>

The Lutheran Cyclopedia, in its discussion on "Natural Law",<sup>27</sup> also informs us that the term has been used in a number of senses, and at the same time endeavours to show how the term has definite judicial and political or social, as well as theological implications. It writes thus in connexion with the meaning of the term in Lutheran theology:

In Lutheran theology natural law is a remnant of the knowledge with which man was created. Because man's awareness of natural law had become obscured by sin, God gave the Decalog to man, and elaborated upon it in the Holy Scriptures. . . .<sup>28</sup>

That definition, however, is too brief for our present purpose, and is also unsatisfactory for other reasons, which need not be elaborated here. In this paper, however, by "Natural Theology", we include both what is commonly referred to in Lutheran theology as the Natural Knowledge of

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 645.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 645.

<sup>27</sup>Lutheran Cyclopedia, edited by Erwin L. Lueker (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), pp. 730--731.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 731.

God, that is, the teaching that there is an innate knowledge of God in man, and Natural Law, that is, that natural man has some knowledge of the Divine Law. We are not so concerned, t h e n , with the How or the When and the Where of this Natural Knowledge of God and this innate knowledge of the Divine Law, but rather with the fact and the content of Natural Theology as we have defined it, and to what extent this Natural Theology figures in historic Lutheran Theology. That is our first matter for investigation and to which we now direct attention.

## CHAPTER II

### NATURAL THEOLOGY IN HISTORIC LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

In presenting the historic Lutheran position in the doctrine of Natural Theology it is proposed, first, to ascertain what the Lutheran Confessions have to say on this teaching, and secondly, to cite a few relevant pronouncements on it by some of the Church's most representative theologians from Luther to Pieper.

#### A. Natural Theology in the Confessions

As well might be expected in the circumstances, none of the Lutheran Confessions has a specific article on this doctrine, since it was not disputed at the time. Yet, there are sufficient statements made, particularly in connexion with the doctrines of Original Sin, Free Will, and Justification, to establish the position taken by the Confessions with regard to Natural Theology. This already suggests that the Confessions do teach Natural Theology; that there is in man a certain innate knowledge of God and of His Divine Law. Thus, in Article IV, Of Justification, the Apology, speaking of the two principal divisions of Scripture, the Law and the Gospel, says:

Of these two parts the adversaries select the Law, because human reason naturally understands, in some way, the Law (for it has the same judgment divinely written in the mind); [the natural law agrees with the law of

Moses, or the Ten Commandments] and by the Law they seek the remission of sins and justification.<sup>1</sup>

The Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Article V, Of the Law and the Gospel, says much the same thing in this passage: "Even the heathen to a certain extent had a knowledge of God from the natural law, although they neither knew Him aright nor glorified Him aright, Rom. 1:20f."<sup>2</sup> Not quite so specific, but nevertheless clear enough in their teaching of a natural knowledge of God and what this leads to are these passages: "No people has ever been so reprobate as not to institute and observe some divine worship," (Large Catechism, The First Commandment.)<sup>3</sup> "Also the heathen had certain expiations for offenses through which they imagined to be reconciled to God," (Apology, Article 1V.)<sup>4</sup> However, while man by nature is able to perform the outward work, his natural powers are unable to produce the inward motions, such as the fear of God, trust in God, and the ability to worship God as He demands and to keep His Commandments as He would have them kept.<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the most lucid passage of all, however, is found in the Thorough Declaration, Article 11, Of Free Will, or Human Powers. Here this statement is made:

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<sup>1</sup>Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Ev. Lutheran Church (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p.121.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p.959.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p.585.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p.285

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p.53.

Although man's reason or natural intellect indeed has still a dim spark of the knowledge that there is a God, as also of the doctrine of the Law, Rom. 1:19ff., yet it is so ignorant, blind, and perverted that when even the most ingenious and learned men upon earth read or hear the Gospel and the promise of eternal salvation, they cannot from their own powers perceive, apprehend, understand, or believe and regard it as true.<sup>6</sup>

It is apparent, then, that while the Confessions admit the existence of a natural knowledge of God and of the Divine Law, yet this knowledge is a mere faint spark. And the reason for this is the intensity of man's original sin. Thus the Apology, Article 11, Of Original Sin, says:

Therefore the ancient definition, when it says that sin is the lack of righteousness, not only denies obedience with respect to man's powers . . . but also denies the knowledge of God, confidence in God, the fear and love of God, or certainly the power to produce these affections.<sup>7</sup>

For, "God cannot be treated with, God cannot be apprehended, except through the Word," (Apology, Article 1V.)<sup>8</sup>

The teaching of the Confessions on Natural Theology has been well summarized by Dr. Mayer thus:

Strictly speaking, man is ignorant of God, and at best he has only a faint spark of knowledge that there is a God. He cannot know God's wrath nor His grace, because original sin is essentially ignorance of God. When the Confessions state that human reason understands the Law in a certain way, they refer to the external work of the Law, not to the real meaning of the Law, which implies fear and love of Him above all things and trusting Him in all afflictions. Man recognizes that there is a divine law, but he fails to understand the real meaning of the

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 883.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 139

fact that it is God's Law which confronts him.<sup>9</sup>

In short, while the Confessions clearly teach the reality of Natural Theology, they just as clearly emphasize the limitations of this Theology because of man's sinfulness, and the wide difference between the natural and the revealed knowledge of God, a difference so great that the natural knowledge of God sinks almost into nothingness.

### B. Natural Theology in Luther

As Philip Watson,<sup>10</sup> Hugh Thomson Kerr,<sup>11</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan<sup>12</sup> and others have pointed out, there is no doubt about Luther's view on Natural Theology. Pelikan maintains that Luther's earlier writings contain little systematic discussion of the subject, and that it was with the passing of the years and the growth of the Reformation that Luther became increasingly interested in the question.<sup>13</sup> Be that as it may, there is nothing in Luther to show that at any time he doubts

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<sup>9</sup>F.E.Mayer, The Religious Bodies of America (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), p. 148.

<sup>10</sup>Philip S. Watson, Let God Be God! (London: The Epworth Press, 1948), in the chapter, The Revelation of God, pp. 73-96.

<sup>11</sup>Hugh Thomson Kerr Jr., A Compend of Luther's Theology (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1943), pp. 23-29.

<sup>12</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, From Luther to Kierkegaard, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), pp. 21-23.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 21, 22.

the existence of man's natural knowledge of God and of the Divine Law written in the heart. It is true that Luther's Natural Theology, particularly his teaching concerning Natural Law, has been variously interpreted and often completely misrepresented, as Watson points out in countering the view of Trcoltsch.<sup>14</sup> But it is Luther himself, not his interpreters, that we are dealing with at the moment.

Luther holds that there is a twofold knowledge of God: General and Particular. In his Commentary on Galatians he writes:

If all men knew God, wherefore then doth Paul say, that the Galatians knew not God before the preaching of the Gospel? I answer, there is a double knowledge of God, general and particular. All men have the general knowledge, namely, that there is a God, that He created heaven and earth, that He is just, that He punisheth the wicked. But what God thinketh of us, what His will is toward us, what He will give or what He will do to the end that we may be delivered from sin and death, and be saved (which is the true knowledge of God indeed), this they know not.<sup>15</sup>

Luther then shows in the sequel of this passage how man, because of his natural knowledge of God, worships idols because, inasmuch as man knows that there is a God, he is constrained to worship Him; but since he does not know the true God, he follows his vain and wicked imaginations of God.<sup>16</sup> Commenting on this, Watson conveys Luther's thought thus:

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<sup>14</sup>Watson, op. cit., pp.110-116.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 74.

For want of the particular knowledge, the true significance of the general knowledge they possess is lost upon them. From this point of view, it is hardly an exaggeration to say that without the particular knowledge, "which is the true knowledge of God indeed", men do not really know God at all-- just as "that man does not know a prince who knows his power and his wealth, but he who understands the affections and all the counsels of the prince". "Wherefore", Luther can say without inconsistency, "Christ is the only mean, and as ye would say, the glass by the which we see God, that is to say, we know His will."<sup>17</sup>

Next, in investigating Luther's view on man's natural knowledge of God we ask: What is the content of Luther's general or natural knowledge of God? Watson believes that Luther teaches considerably more than the bare fact of God's existence, that Luther finds quite a number of the characteristic attributes of divinity known by the heathen, and that the two most important of these, in Watson's opinion, are Sovereignty and Righteousness. Therefore,

The essence of the general knowledge, according to Luther's own definition of it, is "that there is a God, that He created heaven and earth, that He is just, that He punisheth the wicked."<sup>18</sup>

It is in connexion with the second of these attributes that Watson draws attention to Luther's position in regard to Natural Law. He quotes Luther as saying:

God wishes the law to be taught (Luther asserts) and He reveals it divinely, nay He inscribes it on the minds, as Paul proves in Romans 2. And from just this natural knowledge all the books of the sounder philosophers have been born, as of Aesop, Aristotle, Plato, Xenophon, Cicero, Cato.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

To this Watson adds:

Although the Gentiles did not receive the written law of Moses, "yet they received the spiritual law . . . which is impressed upon all, both Jews and Gentiles, to which also all are under obligation". The essence of this law is contained in the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12); for men "naturally judge that a man ought to do unto another as he would another should do unto him". Here the entire meaning of the traditional law (lex tradita) is summed up; it is nothing else but "this natural law (lex naturalis) of which none can be ignorant". Hence Luther can claim that the Ten Commandments themselves, at least in their essential significance, are written on the hearts of all men, and that Moses was not the author, but only the interpreter of these natural laws.<sup>20</sup>

Man's natural knowledge of the Law of God, to be sure, is very weak and faltering, for it is obscured by sin. This is why God gave His written law and published it through Moses. Yet Luther maintains that some measure of the natural law remains in man's nature, for,

It is certain that the law might be preached to us for a hundred years in vain, as to some ass, if it were not written on our hearts so that when we are admonished we instantly say: Yes, that is so.<sup>21</sup>

Luther, therefore, in his Natural Theology, includes both the natural knowledge of God and the natural knowledge of the Divine Law. One further question, however, still needs to be answered before we leave Luther's Natural Theology. That is: From where did Luther get his Natural Theology? Or, in other words, on what did he base it?

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 83.

According to Watson,<sup>22</sup> and also to Pelikan,<sup>23</sup> who refers to Watson, "Luther shunned the usual proofs for the existence of God,"<sup>24</sup> although it is admitted that he quotes with high approval an example from Cicero of the teleological argument for the existence of God. Hugh Thomson Kerr gives the relevant passage:

Aristotle . . . does not believe that God presides over human affairs, or if he does, he thinks that God governs the world much as a sleepy maid rocks the baby. But Cicero got much further. I believe that he gathered together whatever of good he found in all the Greek writers. He proves the existence of God from the generation of species, a very strong argument, which has often moved me: a cow always bears a cow, a horse a horse; a cow never bears a horse, nor a horse a cow, nor a goldfinch a siskin. It follows therefore that there must be some power which regulates all this. We have very obvious proof that God exists, in the exact and perpetual movement of the heavenly bodies.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, as Watson points out, Luther had little time for the philosophical proofs of the existence of God as well as for the Thomistic type of natural theology. Watson writes:

Luther would entirely approve the view 'that our knowledge of God is not inferential in character and that the attempt to reach God by means of argument is therefore wrong in principle'. He condemns the inferential method in scores of passages, where he warns us against trying to find God in the scholastic manner by means of 'reason' and 'speculation'.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>ibid., p.76ff.

<sup>23</sup>Pelikan, op. cit., p.22.

<sup>24</sup>ibid., p.22.

<sup>25</sup>Kerr, op. cit., p.26.

<sup>26</sup>Watson, op. cit., p.78.

In short, "What Luther calls the general knowledge of God, then, is not the result of any human quest for God, but is prior to all man's seeking and is given by God Himself."<sup>27</sup>

And the Biblical passage that Luther has in mind is particularly the first two chapters of Romans. Thus, he writes:

Even the heathen have this awareness (sensum) by a natural instinct, that there is some supreme deity (numen) . . . as Paul says in Romans I, that the Gentiles knew God by nature. For this knowledge is divinely implanted in the minds of men . . . even if they afterwards err in this, who that God is and how He wills to be worshipped.<sup>28</sup>

And reference has already been made to his comment on Romans 2 in connexion with the natural law where he emphasizes that God "reveals it divinely, nay He inscribes it on the minds of all men."<sup>29</sup> Watson, accordingly, rightly comments on Luther's Bible-based Natural Theology in these words:

He had, after all, read his New Testament; and the first two chapters of the Epistle to the Romans, along with other passages dear to the natural theologians, could not escape his notice. He had, furthermore, too much reverence for the sacred text to ignore such passages, or to dismiss them as unimportant.<sup>30</sup>

Luther's view on Natural Theology, then, in all essential respects, is the same as the Lutheran Confessions. There is in man a natural knowledge of God and of the Divine Law, and this truth may be obtained by contemplation of the universe and its government, but above all it must be accepted because the Word teaches it. At the same time, Luther, with the

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<sup>27</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

Confessions, stresses the utter weakness of man's natural knowledge because of sin, and because of this, natural man is really in darkness concerning God's essential character, His inmost purpose and will. Man can only know God aright through Christ, who is brought to us in the Divine Word.

### C. Natural Theology in Chemnitz

The next Lutheran theologian whose views on Natural Theology we propose to ascertain is Martin Chemnitz, 1522 - 1586, the man whom Dr. Walther called, "the instrument that God selected for the reconstruction of an almost ruined Lutheran Church."<sup>31</sup> For Chemnitz's Natural Theology we shall be guided by Dr. Pieper, who, in his Christian Dogmatics, in elaborating the Doctrine of God refers to some statements from Chemnitz's Loci.<sup>32</sup> There, in answer to the question: What is the natural knowledge, what is its character, its extent, and its efficacy? Chemnitz gives this answer:

Strictly speaking, it is non-existent, or imperfect, or inactive. It is non-existent, because in the entire realm of philosophy there is no knowledge whatsoever of the gracious promise of the forgiveness of sin. This has been revealed to the Church by the Son of God . . . . It is imperfect, because the Gentiles knew only a part of the Law. Concerning the worship of the heart commanded in the First Table, reason knows nothing definite; at best the heathen philosophers can give some instructions concerning outward conduct. It is inactive, for

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<sup>31</sup>Pelikan, op. cit., p.43.

<sup>32</sup>Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), p.375.

although the knowledge that there is a God, and that He prescribes an obedience which carefully distinguishes between good and evil, is inscribed in the human heart, nevertheless man's assent to this knowledge is not only weak, but is frequently suppressed entirely by horrible doubt.<sup>33</sup>

With regard to Natural Law, Dr. Pieper reveals this from

Chemnitz:

Speaking of the value of the Natural Law and warning against identifying it absolutely with the written Law, the Decalog, Chemnitz enumerates the following points: (1) Paul discusses this matter ex professo in Romans 1 and 2 and ascribes honorable terms to the Natural Law. He calls it God's truth (Rom. 1:18); God's manifestation (v.19); God's judgment (v.32); the work of the Law written into the heart at man's very creation (Rom. 2:15). And even the term lex naturae is taken from the Scriptures: "The Gentiles do by nature the things of the Law" (Rom. 2:14). And we gratefully acknowledge the blessing that God did not permit the light of the Law to be totally extinguished through the Fall, but wanted certain remnants to remain, so that among men there might be a political society in which God through the Gospel could gather His Church. The terms employed by Paul show that these remnants are indeed to be considered highly. (2) The comparison between the natural and the written Law has the useful purpose of teaching us to respect and praise all those pronouncements which philosophers, poets, historians, legislators, etc., made on moral issues and which agree with the Natural Law, for they are the divine right and the divinely revealed truth of God . . . (3) It is also helpful to the end that we recognize the testimony of the conscience in the unregenerate as a genuine testimony, lest men deaden the accusing thoughts (Rom. 2:15) under the pretense that the testimony of the conscience is an empty fantasy, causing worry only to women, whereas in reality it is the judgment of God convincing man of his sin. (4) The comparison of the unwritten with the written Law enables us to observe in which points the natural knowledge of the Law is obscured, where the judgment is corrupt, and which acts, both good and evil, are unknown to reason and revealed only in the Law.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>ibid., p. 375.

<sup>34</sup>ibid., p. 375.

It is evident from these pronouncements of Chemnitz that he follows Luther and the Confessions, particularly the Formula of Concord, which is, of course, largely his work. He holds that man has an innate knowledge of God and of the Divine Law; that this knowledge of God and of the Law is not an achievement of man through the exercise of his reason, but it has been placed in man's heart by God Himself; that this knowledge is, nevertheless, imperfect and weak, and that the natural Law is but a mere remnant of the Divine Law. Yet, despite these severe limitations, the natural knowledge of God and of the Divine Law is to be regarded highly and gratefully for it is the gift of God. Finally, we note how Chemnitz, in establishing his teaching on Natural Theology, relies upon the traditional sedes doctrinae, Romans 1 and 2, where, according to him, Paul discusses the matter ex professo. Thus, even if he did, in his Loci, retain many of the philosophical terms and theological formulations of Melancthon, as has been claimed,<sup>35</sup> it can scarcely be denied that Chemnitz aims to present the Scriptures rather than philosophy. And if, in doing so, he uses philosophical terms and formulations as a means to an end, that is surely insufficient evidence to convict him of Aristotelianism.

#### D. Natural Theology in Hollaz

David Hollaz, 1648 - 1713, who, according to Jaroslav

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<sup>35</sup>pelikan, op. cit., p.46

Pelikan, whose article, Natural Theology in David Hollaz,<sup>36</sup> is the chief source of these comments, "stands at the close of the classic period of orthodox Lutheran dogmatics,"<sup>37</sup> and is indispensable for an evaluation of the continuity and the stand of Lutheran orthodoxy on the eve of the controversial eighteenth century.<sup>38</sup> Pelikan summarizes Hollaz' natural theology in the following paragraph:

The natural knowledge of God is that by which a man partially recognizes the existence, essence, attributes, and actions of God from principles known by nature; it is divided into the innate and the acquired. The innate natural knowledge of God is the perfection with which a man is born, similar to a habitus; with its assistance the human intellect understands the truth of evident propositions about God without pondering them, having grasped their results, and grants them undoubting assent. The acquired natural knowledge is that which is gained through pondering, on the basis of the testimony of others, as well as of an observation of creation.<sup>39</sup>

In dealing with the problem: Did not the depravity of man forbid his having any knowledge of God? the problematics of which issue had forced Flacius into a denial of the notitia Dei innata, Hollaz finds no conflict between the depravity of man and the natural knowledge of God. He holds that the remnants of the divine image and of the divine Law are natural, and that, while it is true that the human intellect cannot comprehend purely spiritual matters, nor

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<sup>36</sup>Jaroslav Pelikan, "Natural Theology in David Hollaz," Concordia Theological Monthly, XVIII (April, 1947)pp. 253-263.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 262.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 263.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 259.

transmit them to the will, yet these remnants of the divine image of God and of the divine Law are innate in the minds of man.<sup>40</sup>

But why, then, are there atheists in the world? Hollaz answers that this is not because man has no innate knowledge of God, for this cannot be eradicated; rather, anyone who denies the existence of God does so because he does not want to believe that, "there exists a God who is the omnipresent omniscient, and most just Punisher of trespasses."<sup>41</sup>

Pelikan records that Hollaz' discussion of the natural Law is conventional but brief. The statements that are produced give some idea of the function of this natural Law, but do not state specifically on what Hollaz bases his teaching. If it is "conventional", it may mean that Hollaz has derived method, content and significance of his Natural Theology from Aristotelian philosophy, a feature of discussions of this kind in almost all the prominent theologians of the age of Orthodoxy, as Pelikan maintains elsewhere;<sup>42</sup> but it is more likely that "conventional" implies that Hollaz, with Luther and other orthodox Lutheran theologians, based his Natural Theology on Scripture revelation, for Hollaz held fast to Biblical revelation.<sup>43</sup> At any rate, Hollaz certainly believes

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., pp. 258, 259.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 260

<sup>42</sup>Pelikan, From Luther to Kierkegaard, p. 68.

<sup>43</sup>Pelikan, Natural Theology in David Hollaz, p. 262.

in a natural knowledge of God and of the Divine Law apart from the revealed knowledge of God and of the Law. It is true, the natural knowledge of God is fragmentary, erring, and quite insufficient for ascertaining God's plan of salvation; yet, those who deny this natural knowledge do so against their own better judgement, for the natural knowledge of God cannot be eradicated.

#### E. Natural Theology in Pieper

Finally, we propose to look briefly at the Natural Theology of the greatest Lutheran dogmatician of more recent years, Franz Pieper, 1852 - 1931. Pieper, in his Christian Dogmatics,<sup>14</sup> distinguishes between a natural and a Christian knowledge of God. The natural knowledge of God is derived, first, from the works of creation, as Romans 1:20 clearly teaches, a teaching that is corroborated by certain heathen philosophers who, employing their reason, use almost identical language when speaking of the existence of God. Secondly, man knows that there is a God from God's continuous operation both in the realm of nature and in human history, as we learn from Acts 14: 15-17, and from Acts 17: 26-28. Thirdly, Pieper on the basis of Romans 2: 14-15, teaches the so-called Moral argument for the existence of God, namely, from the Divine Law written into the heart of all men, by which means

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<sup>14</sup>Pieper, op. cit., pp. 371-376.

God confronts man directly from within man's nature.<sup>45</sup>

As to the content and extent of man's natural knowledge of God, Pieper holds:

Man knows by nature not only that there is a personal, eternal, and almighty God, the Creator, Preserver, and Ruler of the universe, but also that this God is holy and just, who demands and rewards the good and condemns and punishes the evil.<sup>46</sup>

In its sphere, the natural knowledge of God is "the truth", as Romans 1:18 asserts. Atheism of all forms is neither rational nor scientific. And, although man, because of his love for immorality, suppresses and denies this natural knowledge of God, yet it is true, as Hollaz maintains:

It is possible that in theory man become atheists. By nature they are not atheists, but they become such when God in His justice forsakes them and the devil blinds them; not by a total eradication of the light of nature, but by the suppression of its function and exercise . . . . The law of nature will never permit anyone to entertain as his deliberate and settled conviction the conclusion that there is no God . . . . It is impossible to conceive of anyone whose conscience will not finally assert itself and in the very hour of death accuse man of having ignored God.<sup>47</sup>

With Quenstedt, Pieper believes that the natural knowledge of God is both innate and acquired, innate because God has by nature impressed certain fragments of the divine image upon the minds of men, and acquired inasmuch as man, through a process of reasoning and accurate contemplation of created things is able to find traces of the divinity behind the

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., pp. 371, 372.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 371.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., p. 373

works of creation.<sup>48</sup>

Pieper, who always " kept the practical purpose of theology in the foreground, so that the doctrines presented appeal not only to the mind but also to the heart,"<sup>49</sup> finds, from the Scriptures, these practical results of man's natural knowledge of God. On the one hand, it is entirely insufficient to attain salvation:

It arouses the conscience of man, but it cannot quiet the awakened conscience; it shows man that there is a God and a divine law, but it does not enable man to keep this law. The natural knowledge of God leaves man with an evil conscience and under the curse (Rom. 1:19,21; 1:32; 2:14-15). Without faith in the Gospel, man remains extra ecclesiam and in a state of hopelessness and despair (Eph. 2:12).<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, the natural knowledge of God has this positive value: it is the foundation of civil righteousness, which is indispensable for the maintenance of all social relations; it is of value for the Church, for the Church has its temporary home in the body politic, and civil righteousness, which maintains order and peace, thus indirectly serves the Church; and, as Luther pointed out, if the Natural Law had not been inscribed and placed by God into the heart, one would have to preach a long time before the consciences are touched.<sup>51</sup>

In evaluating Pieper's Natural Theology, apart from the

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., pp. 373, 374.

<sup>49</sup>Lutheran Cyclopedia, edited by Erwin L. Lueker (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), p. 817.

<sup>50</sup>Pieper, op. cit., p. 374.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., p. 374.

perspicuity of his presentation, two points stand out. One is this, that Pieper aims to present the Biblical doctrine, for, although he uses the philosophical proofs - the cosmological, the historico-theological and the moral arguments - he refers to these because they confirm the Scriptures, which affirm that this ability to know something of God, His works and His nature, is innate, and is placed in man's mind by God Himself. Secondly, by quoting with approval the Lutheran Confessions and a number of earlier Lutheran theologians - Luther, Chemnitz, Gerhard, Hollaz and Quenstedt - it is evident that Pieper's intention is to present the genuine historic Lutheran teaching on this doctrine, and that he has done what he says these earlier theologians did, namely:

Our Lutheran theologians are very careful when they discuss the natural knowledge of God. On the one hand, they set forth its value in great detail; and on the other, they stress its inadequacy and utter insufficiency in bringing man to salvation. They condemn those who deny that there is a natural knowledge of God as well as the great number of those who admit men to heaven on the basis of their natural knowledge of God. And<sup>52</sup> in this criticism they spare neither friend nor foe.

This brings to an end our hasty review of Natural Theology in Historic Lutheran Theology from Luther to Pieper. While it is apparent that there is a certain development of the doctrine as far as form and presentation are concerned, it is equally obvious that the content and the significance of the doctrine have undergone no essential change. In

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<sup>52</sup>ibid., pp. 375-376.

other words, the works that have been examined here show in every instance that Natural Theology is to them a Scripture doctrine; and it is evident, from their insistence upon this, that they would have taught Natural Theology whether it could or could not have been confirmed by philosophical arguments and proofs. To these Lutheran theologians it is basically a case of Scriptura locuta, res finita. And for working with this principle we cannot fault them; rather, we must admire and commend them, for this is Lutheranism in its truest and noblest sense; it is the exhibition of the sola Scriptura of the Reformation as the one principium cognoscendi. These men knew philosophy; they knew Aristotle, they knew Thomas and others; and they certainly employed philosophical terms and formulations as well as philosophical proofs for Natural Theology. But these are always a means to an end, for these men also knew their Scriptures. And their aim with respect to Natural Theology, and other doctrines too, for that matter, was to present the Scripture content of the doctrine.

We have no doubt, then, that the historic Lutheran doctrine on Natural Theology is intended to be Scriptural. The question that now confronts us in investigating this Lutheran teaching further is whether the Scripture passages traditionally used to support the doctrine are legitimate or not. In other words, the question is: Is the natural knowledge of God and of the Divine Law taught in the Scriptures as the

Lutheran theologians cited above claim it is? As indicated earlier in this paper, there are some, quite apart from Karl Barth and others outside the Lutheran Church, who question this in all seriousness. Accordingly, we now address ourselves to an investigation of the relevant passages.

## CHAPTER 111

### NATURAL THEOLOGY IN THE SCRIPTURES

In seeking to ascertain the Scriptural position in the matter of Natural Theology we propose to concentrate on the four passages usually regarded as the sedes doctrinae for this teaching: Acts 14: 15-17; Acts 17: 24-28; Romans 1:18ff., and Romans 2:14-15. It might be mentioned again in passing that first three passages are usually taken to refer to the doctrine of Natural Theology, and the last one to Natural Law.

#### A. Acts 14: 15-17

These words were spoken by Paul and Barnabas at Lystra. After their arrival at this town from Iconium, St. Luke records how they continued to preach the Gospel here (14:7). He then records one important episode in their ministry at Lystra. A certain cripple, who had been unable to walk from birth, was healed by St. Paul. When the Lystrans recognized the miracle they imagined that the gods had come down to earth in human form. Barnabas, they called Zeus, and Paul, since he was the chief speaker, they called Hermes. Then the priest of Zeus, which god apparently had a temple erected to his honour in this town, urged on by the crowd, made ready to offer sacrifices to the supposed gods. When the Apostles heard this news, they rent their garments in dismay and

consternation, and rushed out into the crowd, crying out:

Men, why are you doing this? We also are men of like nature with you, and bring you good news that you should turn from these vain things to a living God who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the two Apostles, probably with St. Paul as spokesman, in this verse point out to the Lystrans that they - the Apostles - are only men, ὁμοιοπαθεῖς, "of like feelings or affections, of like natures," with other men. Therefore, they are not to be worshipped. Then at once the Apostles begin to preach the true God. This is the "good news they are at present proclaiming," εὐαγγελιζόμενοι (here followed by the infinitive, the only occurrence of this construction in the New Testament<sup>2</sup>), with this intention that the Lystrans should turn "from these vain things," ἀπὸ τούτων τῶν ματαίων, "to the living God." This expression, θεὸν ζῶντα, is thus contrasted with τούτων τῶν ματαίων, and has an almost exact parallel in 1 Thessalonians 1:9, as the marginal reference in Nestle<sup>3</sup> indicates. This passage reads: "For they themselves show of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."<sup>4</sup> This "living God," is further defined as the One "who

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<sup>1</sup>Bible, Holy. Revised Standard Version, Acts 14:15.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Hoferkamp, "Natural Law and the New Testament," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXIII (September, 1952), p.651.

<sup>3</sup>Eberhard Nestle, Novum Testamentum Graece et Germanice, elfte, verbesserte Auflage (Stuttgart: Privilegierte Wuerttembergische Bibelanstalt, 1921.) This is the Greek text being used in this paper. Hereafter it will be referred to as Nestle.

<sup>4</sup>Bible, Holy. Authorized Version, 1 Thes. 1:9.

made the heaven and the earth and sea and all that is in them," a quotation from Exodus 20:11 or Psalm 146:6.

The Apostles continue their sermon on the true God by revealing to their heathen hearers that He, "in the generations that have passed, allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways." The plural, τὰ ἔθνη, like the Hebrew אֲרָצוֹת, usually refers to foreign nations that do not worship the true God, hence, "pagans," "Gentiles." Paul, however, uses the form sometimes when referring to Gentile Christians.<sup>5</sup> The dative, ταῖς ὁδοῖς, implies ways that are wrong, wicked ways that are opposed to the ways of the true God. But apart from stating the simple fact that in bygone times God permitted this state of affairs to continue, no attempt is made to show why God permitted it. The speakers hurry on, in their impassioned address, to add, however, that God in these past ages, "did not leave Himself without witness, for He did good and gave you rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filled your hearts with food and gladness." The construction of this verse is interesting for each of the three participles used is subordinate to the one preceding it. The sense is that God did not turn away from the Gentiles because of their continuance in their wicked ways, but He continued to testify to Himself in doing good by giving rain and fruitful seasons, and by filling their hearts with joy through this bountiful

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<sup>5</sup>J.H.Thayer, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (New York: American Book Company, 1889), p. 166.

provision of their temporal needs.

In this address of the Apostles, therefore, two matters stand out. First, it is clear that the Apostles proclaim a revelation of God in creation. God has given ample testimony of Himself in the acts enumerated by the speakers. The second matter that is perfectly obvious is that the hearers, who were Gentiles, did not learn to know the true God through His self-manifestation in nature. The situation is well expressed by Hoferkamp:

Acts 14:16 does not state that men infer the Creator from the creature, but that God witnesses to Himself by giving rain and fruitful seasons. Second, this speech does not at all say that men received the witness of God in creation. It rather says the very opposite. Men had turned to  $\mu\acute{\alpha}\tau\alpha\iota\alpha$ . The fact that the Apostles preached to them the good news that they should turn ( $\epsilon\pi\lambda\sigma\tau\rho\acute{\epsilon}\phi\epsilon\iota\nu$ ,  $\tau\eta\kappa\epsilon$ ) from the  $\mu\acute{\alpha}\tau\alpha\iota\alpha$  to the living God is the clearest possible indication that a rift exists between Creator and creature. In fact, all the statements of the text -- that the Gentiles worshipped various deities (Jupiter and Mercury), that God had up to that time permitted them to walk in their own ways, that He nevertheless had not left Himself without witness, and that they were now to turn to the living God -- irrefutably proclaim that the revelation in creation had been spurned. Then why did the Apostles even mention the fact that God had not left Himself without witness? To show them what the  $\mu\alpha\rho\tau\omega\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$  was which they had not accepted, and as a basis for telling them now who the true God is.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, this passage, in itself, can hardly be accepted as a Scripture proof that there is in man an innate knowledge of God, or that man is able to find the true God by inferring His existence and His works from the creation. He ought to be able to, but he does not, is what this text teaches.

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<sup>6</sup>Hoferkamp, op. cit., pp.651-652.

## B. Acts 17: 22-31

In Acts 17: 15, St. Luke records the arrival of Paul in Athens. In the following verses the inspired historian tells how the Apostle inspected this famous city and saw the many idols and the many temples dedicated to their worship, a sight that both distressed and irritated him. Accordingly, he did not wait for Silas and Timothy before he commenced mission work in Athens, but at once he began to reason with the Jews in the synagogue there. As well, he spent some time in the renowned Athenian Agora talking to the pagan Greeks who happened to be there. The Agora was also the meeting place for the philosophers and their disciples, thus it came about that Paul met some Epicureans and some Stoics and had discussions with them. These discussions gave Paul the opportunity to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the resurrection, a preaching that was despised by some of the hearers, who referred to Paul as a *σπερμολόγος* ; others commented that the Apostle seemed to be a preacher of foreign divinities. The inordinate desire of the hearers for new and strange religious matters, however, caused them to take hold of Paul and bring him before the Areopagus, the supreme Council of Athens. Thus St. Paul appeared before this famous assembly and obtained a grand opportunity to give a full exposition of his teaching concerning the true God and the Gospel of Jesus. It is this famous address of the Apostle's to which we now direct attention.

Paul commences his address by stating how very religious, or how unusually devoted to deities he finds the Athenians. The word  $\delta\epsilon\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\lambda\mu\upsilon\nu\epsilon\tau\tau\acute{\iota}\rho\omicron\omicron\varsigma$ , although a comparative, has the sense of a superlative. While some lexicographers, Souter for example, hold that the Authorized Version's "superstitious", is not wrong,<sup>7</sup> nevertheless the basic meaning of the word is, "respectful of what is divine, religious." Then the Apostle tells his hearers, how, in passing through their city and in observing their objects of worship, he found an altar on which had been inscribed, "To the Unknown God." This altar inscription,  $\text{ΑΓΝΩΣΤΩ ΘΕΩ}$ , Hoeferkamp notes, has caused a great deal of investigation and discussion, and, although no altar with this inscription on it has been discovered, that does not prove that this exact inscription did not exist.<sup>8</sup> Neither is it within the scope of this present paper to investigate who this unknown god was. Lenski is to the point when he says:

It was wholly immaterial to the apostle as to how and why this altar had been erected in Athens, or what polytheistic conceptions the Athenians might entertain concerning this "God." He intended to regard this altar and its inscription only as a confession on the part of the Athenians that, despite their multitude of divinities, one God existed of whom they themselves said that, while they knew of him, they did not in any way know him.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Alexander Souter, A Pocket Lexicon to the Greek New Testament (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 58.

<sup>8</sup>Hoeferkamp, op. cit., p. 652.

<sup>9</sup>R.C.H. Lenski, The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles (Columbus, Ohio: The Wartburg Press, 1944), p. 723.

This unknown God, the Apostle continues, "What you do not know but do worship, I am proclaiming to you." The Apostle then proceeds to describe this God. With an allusion to Isaiah 42:5 he tells how this God, ὁ θεός, the true God, "who made the world and everything in it, He, the Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in shrines that are made by human hands, nor is He served by human hands as if He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all life and breath and all things." Thus, the Apostle points out to his illustrious audience that the true God is the omnipotent Creator and Preserver who is absolute and sufficient in Himself.<sup>10</sup> With these words, then, St. Paul sweeps aside the whole system of idolatrous Greek religion by showing that there is one God, not many, and that He does not require for His own benefit the multitudinous offerings and sacrifices that characterized pagan Greek worship.

Next, the Apostle speaks about anthropology. He says: "And He made from one every nation of men to dwell upon all the face of the earth, having fixed their allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling that they should seek God, if, indeed, they might touch Him and find Him, even though He is not far from any one of us, for in Him we live and move and are, as also some of your poets have said: 'For we are also of His offspring.'"

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 725.

In verse 26 a textual variant is ἐξ ἑνὸς αἵματος , "from one man's blood." But the better attested text reads, ἐξ ἑνός , "from one man," that is, from Adam. Thus the Apostle teaches the unity of the human race and its development from a common progenitor. Once again, one of the pet theories of the Athenians was swept aside, for they held that the Greeks were αὐτόχθονες , "natives of the soil."

St. Paul's reference to the fact that God allotted periods and boundaries to the various nations scattered over the face of the earth is undoubtedly meant to reveal that God directs and guides the destiny of nations; He appoints the rise and the fall of nations, and the time and space of their duration. But, while God is the Author of world history, the text does not say that man can explain every mystery of nations, neither is man infallible in his judgement of various nations on the basis of their rise and fall as though this testified God's approval or disapproval.

God's purpose in so manifesting Himself in world history is that men should seek Him. This implies, on the one hand, that men by nature have lost Him, and, on the other hand, that men ought to be able to find Him. The object of men's seeking Him is that they " might touch Him and find Him, for He is not far from any one of us, for in Him we live and move and are." Lenski comments appropriately:

Paul is trying to open the eyes of the pagans to what God has given them: the cosmos to testify of Him, their existence in the midst of endless beneficence, their nation in its development in a grand location on the

earth with all that thus made Greece and especially Athens great. God has every right to expect that men such as those of Athens would long ago have arrived at a true and an adequate natural conception of their Creator, Ruler, and Benefactor. A silent, shaming question runs through the Apostle's words: "Why had the Athenians not done so, they who even regarded themselves as standing so high among the nations?"<sup>11</sup>

Whether the Apostle is quoting some Greek poet, possibly Epimenides, when he says, "In Him we live and move and are," will not concern us. In the next statement Paul makes, however, he does refer definitely to some Greek poets, one of whom he quotes. This poet is believed to have been the Stoic, Aratus, who lived about the year 300 B.C., and who composed a poem on astronomy, Phaenomena.<sup>12</sup> Paul's purpose is to substantiate all that he has said in verses 26 to 28. Meyer remarks how Paul thus adduces a parallel to his own assertion, which stands thus:

As the offspring of God, we men stand in such homogeneity to God, and thus in such necessary and essential connection with God, that we cannot have life, etc. without Him, but only in Him.<sup>13</sup>

In the third section of his address, verses 29 to 31, we are reminded particularly of what was probably said by the same Apostle in Acts 14:16. St. Paul continues: "Accordingly,

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<sup>11</sup>ibid., p. 731.

<sup>12</sup>ibid., p. 732.

<sup>13</sup>H.A.W. Meyer, Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Acts of the Apostles, translated from the fourth edition of the German by Paton J. Gloag, the translation revised and edited by William P. Dickson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1878), 11. 120.

since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, the product of human art and imagination. The times of ignorance, therefore, God overlooked, but now He announces to men that everywhere all are to repent, because He has fixed a day in which He is about to judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He ordained, having given proof of this to all men by having raised Him from the dead."

Paul shows that, because men are the γένος of God, therefore the θεῶν, the divine nature that is peculiar to God, cannot be like gold or silver or sculpture, which are the products of human skill and belong to a different γένος.<sup>14</sup> Because they made gods of this kind the Greeks had shown that they had not found the true God; they had not done what they were capable of doing, and what God expected them to do - to find Him. But God "overlooked the times of ignorance by looking at Christ and the plan of salvation for the coming ages."<sup>15</sup> Now, however, God was announcing to men everywhere, through His appointed heralds, one of whom was the Apostle Paul, that all should turn from their wicked ways, that they should repent and turn to the true God. And what makes it imperative for man to heed this call to repentance and acceptance of the true God and His salvation is that a Day of Judgement is coming when the whole world will be judged by Jesus Christ,

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<sup>14</sup>Hoeferkamp, op. cit., p. 653.

<sup>15</sup>Lenski, op. cit., p. 736.

the Man whom God has set apart for this purpose; and the Judgement will be ἐν δικαιοσύνη , as long ago prophesied in Psalm 96: 13 and Psalm 98: 9.

Once again, as in Acts 14: 15-17, we draw attention to the two matters that appear to dominate the thought of this passage, Acts 17: 22-31. These are, first, that God clearly reveals Himself as the true God through His works of Creation, Preservation, and more particularly, in the history of nations and of mankind in general; that He made all men from one common progenitor that they should seek Him and find Him, and that this is within their power inasmuch as "we live and move and are" in Him or by His power. Yet, secondly, the Apostle does not give any evidence that men have found the true God through these natural phenomena. On the contrary, man has done precisely the opposite. He has turned away from God. He worships idols and images, the product of human art and invention.

Our conclusions, therefore, after considering this passage for its natural theology content are these: Natural man ought to seek and find the true God through the natural means here enumerated, but he does not. There ought to be in him a natural knowledge of the true God, but man does not give any evidence of this. And this is the same state of affairs we found in the earlier passage studied, Acts 14:15-17.

## C. Romans 1: 18-31

We now turn to the most important passage for the Natural Knowledge of God, Romans 1: 18-31. In the theme of his letter, stated in 1:16, 17, St. Paul has emphasized the δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ, Luther's famous, "die Gerechtigkeit, die vor Gott gilt,"<sup>16</sup> which Lenski explains as, "the status of righteousness into which faith and the believer are placed by the judicial verdict of God."<sup>17</sup> This "righteousness", which alone avails for man before God, "is being revealed" (namely, by God, who is the agent behind the passive ἀποκαλύπτεται) in the Gospel, for ἐν αὐτῷ clearly refers to τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, verse 16.

Now, contrasted with this revelation of God's righteousness in the Gospel is the revelation of God's wrath and the unrighteousness of man. Gifford comments appropriately, "There is a twofold revelation: in the one is seen a 'power of God unto salvation,' in the other, the destroying power of God's wrath: there the righteousness of God, here the unrighteousness of man."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Quoted by R.C.H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Press, 1945) p. 89.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>18</sup>E.H. Gifford, The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans (London: John Murray, 1886), p. 62.

Apart from stating the fact, "an exordium terrible as lightning,"<sup>19</sup> the Apostle does not say specifically in what way the ὀργὴ Θεοῦ "is being revealed." The verb, ἀποκαλύπτεται, however, as above in verse 17, is the present passive and implies that the revelation is being made continually. On the other hand, upon what, ἐπί, the ὀργὴ Θεοῦ is being revealed is plainly stated: it is upon "all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." While it is apparent from this that every form of ἀσέβεια καὶ ἀδίκια ἀνθρώπων, and that every impious man brings down from heaven the ὀργὴ Θεοῦ, the Apostle here singles out especially those men, "who suppress the truth in unrighteousness."

The important question is: what is the ἀλήθεια that these men hold back, hinder, or suppress? Karl Barth is at one time of the opinion that it is the righteousness of God. He writes:

Men have imprisoned and encased the truth -- the righteousness of God; they have trimmed it to their own measure, and thereby robbed it both of its earnestness and of its significance. They have made it ordinary, harmless, and useless; and thereby transformed it into untruth.<sup>20</sup>

A little later the same commentator gives the impression that ἀλήθεια means something else, for he says:

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<sup>19</sup>P. Melancthon, quoted by Gifford, *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>20</sup>Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans, translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 45.

The truth concerning the limiting and dissolving of men by the unknown God, which breaks forth in the resurrection, is a known truth: this is the tragic factor in the story of the passion of the truth.<sup>21</sup>

Barth, however, appears to be deliberately side-stepping the issue that is involved when ἀλήθεια is associated with what both the construction and the context of the whole passage require, namely, τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ . This is the "truth" that men wilfully "hold back." Thayer is right when he says that τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ may mean either, "that which may be known of God, or that which is known of God,"<sup>22</sup> for both are implied here. Certain truths regarding God are both knowable and known to men. Not everything concerning God is known or knowable. Thus Gifford's comment is to the point:

That which may be known must not, however, be pressed to mean all that can possibly be known; but, as the next verse plainly shews, it means that knowledge of God which is or which may be gained by man's natural faculties exercised upon God's manifestation of Himself in creation.<sup>23</sup>

Men know certain truths regarding God for this reason, γάρ, that God Himself has revealed the information ἐν αὐτοῖς . Grammatically, this could mean, "in their midst, among them," but Gifford's view has much to commend it:

"In them" does not mean "among them," as though this knowledge were limited to a few of the wise and learned,

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 45

<sup>22</sup>Thayer, op. cit., p. 120.

<sup>23</sup>Gifford, op. cit., p. 62.

nor "in their consciousness" (Meyer), but "in them" as being what they are, in their very nature and constitution as men. If men had not a faculty to receive "that which may be known of God," He could not be said to have manifested it "to them."<sup>24</sup>

In verse 20 the latter part of the preceding verse, "for God manifested it to them," is fully explained. We are told, first, what God makes known to man in this manifestation: τὰ ἄορατα αὐτοῦ, "the invisible things of Him," namely His attributes, of which His eternal power, δύναμις, and His divinity, θεϊότης, are specified. Secondly, we are told from what this knowledge of God is to be gained: from, or better, by means of "the things that are made," since τοῖς ποιήμασιν is best taken as a dative of means, which evidently refers to the works of God's creation, including man himself. Thirdly, St. Paul says that God has been manifesting this knowledge of Himself, ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου, where ἀπὸ may indicate source, that is, the place from where man derives a knowledge of the invisible God, or it may be taken as a temporal preposition indicating the time since God has been manifesting Himself in this manner, namely, ever since the creation of the world. While the former interpretation fits well into the context, the latter view seems preferable inasmuch as the phrase, ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου, seems to modify νοούμενα rather than τὰ ἄορατα αὐτοῦ. Lenski, whose view this is, says in support of it:

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<sup>24</sup> ibid., pp. 62, 63.

"From the world's creation on" is a temporal modifier of this perceiving and yet includes all men who have ever lived and brings out the thought that in the things which God made all men have ever had a great revelation concerning God. Man's mind is bound to reflect on "the made things." He has had a long time to do it. All that is mind in the human race has contemplated the made things. All of them proclaim God, have proclaimed him from the creation onward.<sup>25</sup>

Next, this verse reveals how it comes about that man is able to attain to such knowledge of the invisible God through the creation. Man has a  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\varsigma$  by means of which he perceives this. Gifford explains the function thus:

The invisible lying behind the visible as its cause, the unchangeable upholding all the changes of the world, the wisdom whose thoughts are written in heaven, and earth, and sea, the power which makes those thoughts realities, - these and other Divine attributes are conceived in the mind ( $\nu\omicron\omicron\delta\mu\iota\nu\alpha$ ), and so discerned by means of the things that are made. The spontaneous act of reason by which the mind grasps in creation the idea of a Divine Author, St. Paul assumes and asserts as an admitted and unquestionable fact; this fact is indeed the true intellectual basis, as conscience is the moral basis, of all natural religion.<sup>26</sup>

Next, God's manifestation of Himself in the creation and in man himself, and man's ability to comprehend the invisible divine omnipotence and the eternal existence of the Creator therein revealed has this result that man's suppression of this knowledge is not only unrighteousness that brings down the wrath of God, but makes it so that he is without excuse. Whether  $\epsilon\acute{\iota}\varsigma$   $\tau\omicron$  with the infinitive here conveys purpose or result or both does not vitally affect the great truth:

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<sup>25</sup>Lenski, Romans, p. 97.

<sup>26</sup>Gifford, op. cit., p. 63

man's natural knowledge of God is of such extent that it renders him before God ἀναπολογίατος, "without defence or excuse." Lenski says:

No man is able to offer the excuse that he could not see, that it is God's fault and not his own that God is hidden from him. The man who would try to offer this excuse would at once be silenced by the overwhelming testimony of the whole world of created things including his own wonderful being, especially also his own mind and his soul.<sup>27</sup>

The Apostle now goes on, in verses 21ff., to give additional proof why men are without excuse. It is because, "although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God nor give thanks, but became vain in their reasonings, and their unintelligent heart was darkened. Pretending to be wise they became foolish and changed the glory of the immortal God for an image in the likeness of mortal man, and of birds and animals and reptiles." There are two important matters stated here. First, Paul reaffirms that natural man knew God. He refers to this fact in the concessive clause, διότι γίνονται τὸν θεόν. The question is: How did he gain this knowledge? Meyer says: "They had attained the knowledge from the revelation of nature . . . ." <sup>28</sup> Gifford holds much the same view, for he maintains that, "St. Paul here clearly teaches that men knew enough of God from His works to glorify Him in a way befitting His Divine Nature." <sup>29</sup> But it is doubtful if

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<sup>27</sup> Lenski, Romans, p. 99.

<sup>28</sup> Meyer, op. cit., p. 83.

<sup>29</sup> Gifford, op. cit., p. 64.

this is really taught here, unless we understand it this way: "Men do not acquire this knowledge by themselves, by their own powers of speculation. It is God Himself who reveals His δίδως δύναμις καὶ θεότης to men." <sup>30</sup> In fact, there is much in favour of Hoferkamp's view when he adds to the above statement:

Paul does not at all concern himself with the question of how this knowledge comes into being. He does not find the reason for the revelation of the Creator in this, that the cosmos is the εἰκὼν of God Himself, but in that God has so willed it: ὁ θεὸς γὰρ αὐτοῖς ἠφάνισεν , v. 19. The fact that God's invisible qualities are clearly perceived in the things that are made does not point to a speculative deduction on man's part, but only the recognition by man of God's power and deity, which are mediated through the ποικύματα .<sup>31</sup>

Another question that arises in connexion with γνόντες τὸν θεόν is this: When did man have this knowledge of God? Does it still exist today? The aorist participle γνόντες , points to a certain point in past time. But it will hardly do to argue from this that a present knowledge of God is ruled out. The Apostle is pointing to a certain point in past time. At that time, "although they knew God," they did not let this knowledge of God control them and shape their conduct as God intended thereby. Rather, they deliberately refused to use this knowledge of God to His honour and glory; they turned away from Him. The effect of this was that they became empty, vain, in their reasonings. What Paul is

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<sup>30</sup>Hoferkamp, op. cit., p. 656.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., pp. 659, 660.

stressing is what they did with this natural knowledge of God. And while there is nothing in the passage to indicate that men today have lost this knowledge, it is also reasonable to assume that man's innate knowledge of God is very weak, a mere spark, for man has continued in his downward course of sin and ungodliness. Man has indeed become vain in his reasonings, and his unintelligent sinful heart is dark.

Since the remaining verses of this section merely elaborate what has already been said, we shall mention them with little comment. After stating in verse 23 how perverse natural man glorifies the creature instead of the Creator, the Apostle reveals in verses 24 to 27 how God gave them up and abandoned them over to perversions and unnatural vices, and to all manner of personal and social wickedness, verses 28 to 31.<sup>32</sup>

In recapitulating this section, we use Hoferkamp's fine summary:

1. God's wrath is revealed from heaven against the ungodliness and wickedness of men, v.18.
2. This action of God is justified because men have the truth but suppress it by their wickedness, v.18b.
3. This truth, τὸ γνωστὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, God Himself has revealed to them, v.19.
4. This revelatory process is mediated by the ποιήματα, the things which God has made. Through these ποιήματα men can grasp (νοοῦμεν) God's eternal power and deity, v.20 a,b.

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<sup>32</sup>ibid., p.656.

5. God has unmistakably revealed Himself in the creation for this express purpose, that men might be without excuse, v.20 c.
6. That men are without excuse is shown by the fact that although they knew God (from His Uroffenbarung), they did not glorify and thank Him as God (the pre-supposition being that to know God is to acknowledge Him as sovereign Lord). On the contrary, although they had God's light, they deliberately darkened their minds and made themselves foolish, vv.21-22.
7. They showed this by giving the glory they owe to immortal God to images representing creatures, v.23.
8. Therefore God's wrath delivers them over to perversions, vv. 24 to 27, and to all manner of personal and social wickednesses, vv.28-31.<sup>33</sup>

This passage, with the Acts passages already considered, clearly teaches a natural revelation of God. But it differs from the Acts passages in two important matters. First, it implies that natural man has this innate knowledge of God, not merely that he ought to have it. And while the passage does not state specifically that man has acquired this knowledge through his own powers of speculation and contemplation of the natural phenomena mentioned - rather, the darkened state of man, brought about by his own senselessness, suggests that this is impossible - nevertheless, it is true that God is known by natural man because God Himself has given him this knowledge through His created works. And the extent of this knowledge is such that it is sufficient to render man inexcusable when that knowledge of God is lost or abused.

Secondly, whereas the Acts passages merely reveal that

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 656.

natural man has failed to find the true God inasmuch as he continues to walk in his wicked ways, which are not God's ways, and in his ignorance worships idols, this Romans passage shows why this state of affairs exists. It is because man deliberately took a course away from God and refused to put to correct use the knowledge God gave him of Himself, an action which brought down upon him the wrath of God and His handing man over to frightful perversions and excesses of all kinds. Thus man in his natural state is totally lost and has no hope of finding the true God or His wonderful plan of salvation, which requires another revelation quite apart from God's revelation of Himself in nature and elsewhere.

Taken together, therefore, these three Natural Knowledge of God passages in the New Testament teach:

1. God expects man to have some natural knowledge of Himself, particularly His eternal power, His deity and His goodness.
2. He expects man to gain this knowledge through His works, the creation and the preservation of the world and mankind, and through His direction and government of the nations of the world.
3. He expects man to have this knowledge of Himself because He Himself has revealed it to him, and therefore natural man is without excuse.
4. Natural man, although he has followed various forms of worship, which suggests that he recognizes a divine power to whom he is responsible, nevertheless has not learned to know the true God through His self-revelation in natural phenomena; rather, he has turned away from Him in following his own ways and in worshipping and glorifying his own human creations.
5. He has done this because he deliberately darkened his mind and shut himself away from God, therefore God in His wrath

has delivered him over to all manner of horrible crimes and vices.

6. Man has one way, and one way only, to escape the coming Judgement that will be in righteousness by Jesus Christ, the Judge, and that is to accept God's written revelation of Himself and His works and to return to Him in repentance and faith.

D. Romans 2: 14-16

We turn, finally, to the great Natural Law passage in the New Testament, Romans 2: 14-16. In the first part of this second chapter of his Letter to the Romans, St. Paul, in pursuing his "proof of the universal need as is contained in the revelation of the righteousness of God by faith,"<sup>34</sup> shows that all men, whether they are guilty of the gross sins mentioned in the latter part of the previous chapter, or whether they are moralists who pride themselves in their so-called good conduct, and on the basis of this sit in judgement on others, thereby condemning themselves, are guilty of God's condemnatory judgement, for there is no partiality with God, who judges the heart and life and will render to every man according to his works. This applies to the Jews, who will be judged by Law, and only Law-doers, not mere Law-hearers, will be pronounced righteous. And the same principle is applicable to the Gentiles. Paul now proceeds to show why the Gentiles can be included under the category of "doers of Law." Gifford, accordingly, summarizes verses 14 to 16 thus:

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<sup>34</sup>Gifford, op. cit., p. 71.

St. Paul shows that the principle stated in v. 13 is a fact universal, and that the formal distinction between Gentile and Jew, v. 12, does not involve any essential difference between them in reference to Divine Judgment. The real existence of the inward law in the Gentiles admits a double proof, the one derived from outward acts (v. 14), the other from the working of conscience (v. 15).<sup>35</sup>

While the Apostle's purpose in these verses, therefore, is clear enough, they are, nevertheless, difficult from an exegetical point of view. The passage is connected to the foregoing with γάρ, "for." ὅταν does not only set forth a possibility, but often something that actually happens, thus, "whenever, as often as." The anarthrous εἴθνη has caused considerable comment, but the suggestion that the omission of the article implies that Paul is not making a categorical statement about all Gentiles<sup>36</sup> has something in its favour, although we hesitate to place too much emphasis on the use or the omission of the article in the Koine. A problem of greater importance is, however: What does the anarthrous νόμος refer to? Hoferkamp writes:

A number of examples show that for Paul there was no distinction between νόμος and ὁ νόμος. In Rom. 5:13, 20 anarthrous νόμος must refer to the Mosaic Law, which entered the world at a particular time. In Gal. 3:23-24 first νόμος is used and then ὁ νόμος, with no distinction in meaning. The same phenomena occurs in Rom. 2:23. The lack of distinction between the two is perhaps most readily apparent in Rom. 2:13-14, where those who are ἐν νόμῳ are obviously Jews, who have the Mosaic Law, whereas τὰ μὴ νόμον ἔχοντα are the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 75, 76.

<sup>36</sup> Hoferkamp, op. cit., p. 661.

ἑθνη . Nevertheless, those who do not have do by nature τὰ τοῦ νόμου . Paul had good precedent for the anarthrous use of νόμος in the Septuagint. In most places Torah referring to the Mosaic Law is translated ε νόμος . But νόμος occurs in many places.<sup>37</sup>

We feel inclined to accept this view, then, that Paul is speaking of the Mosaic Law, the whole Mosaic Law, for it has been pointed out that the Apostle does not distinguish in his use of νόμος between the Decalogue and the remaining Old Testament law material, or between the ethical core and the ceremonial husks.<sup>38</sup>

There are Gentiles, therefore, who have not the Mosaic Law, yet who do the things that this Law requires. They do so φύσει , an instrumental dative, "by nature." They are not told to do so by someone else, but their own instinct tells them to do so. An innate urge compels them to such Law-doing. Thus these Gentiles spoken of ( for the masculine οἱτοί , although we should have expected ταῦτα , undoubtedly refers to ἑθνη ), are the Law for themselves. And they are the Law for themselves because the work of the Law is engraven in their hearts, for "they are such, οἵτινες , as show the work of the Law written in their hearts." Their deeds done by nature without the written Law show they have the work of the Law written in their hearts by God, who is the Agent behind the passive verbal adjective, γραπτόν .

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., pp. 654, 655.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., p. 655.

It should be noted that the Apostle does not say that the Law is written in their hearts (which would be true), but the ἔργον, the "work" of the Law, that is, "the concrete, specific work demanded by the Law in a particular situation."<sup>39</sup> And it is written "in their hearts", for in Biblical usage, καρδία is "the inmost part of man and the point from which springs his action."<sup>40</sup>

A two-fold witness, therefore, testifies to the truth that Gentiles have the Law: the actions in doing the work of the Law, and their conscience. We translate the genitive absolute, συμμάρτυροῦσιν αὐτῶν τῆς συνελδήσεως, "while their conscience at the same time bears witness." The idea is that the conscience thus joins in the witness of the actions to the truth that the Gentiles spoken of have a natural knowledge of what the Law requires. It should be observed, then, that "conscience" is not identical with the Law; it bears witness of this Law. This is expressed very clearly by Prof. Herzer in his fine article, On Conscience, where he makes these observations:

Conscience is an innate aptitude of every human soul. According to Rom. 2,15 it is a witness found in every man. St. Paul here says of the Gentiles that their conscience "bears witness." This is an important passage for us when we seek to establish what the Bible designates as conscience. We see here that the testimony of man's conscience must be distinguished from the "work of the Law written in his heart" or soul. Conscience,

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 663.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 663.

therefore, is not identical with the moral norm, the divine Law, or any other law. It bears witness to the divine Law and its demands, its authoritativeness and sternness. Conscience in man, then, must be defined as the natural aptitude and faculty of the human soul whereby the ethical relation between his disposition or conduct and an acknowledged moral norm is spontaneously suggested to man's consciousness. The primary function of conscience is this, that it applies the Law in its statements concerning the moral quality of an act contemplated or committed.<sup>41</sup>

The Apostle, therefore, makes it clear enough that man by nature has some knowledge of the Divine Law, for to this testify actions in doing the works of that Law, and conscience. The extent of that Law is not stressed; but its existence is.

The next clause, μετὰ τῶν . . . ἀπολογουμένων, has also caused commentators some difficulty. The two main views are these: first, that the clause is merely an explanatory description of the process of conscience in which the thoughts accuse or vindicate one another. Thus ἀλλήλων is referred to thoughts. The other view is this that ἀλλήλων refers to ἕθνη, and the idea is that the Gentiles are disputing with each other, or rather, between themselves; the Gentiles thus give voice to their thoughts by accusing or excusing one another.<sup>42</sup> Although most commentators appear to favour the first view, the latter has this in its favour that it is difficult to work out how the conflicting thoughts of one

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<sup>41</sup>J. Herzer, "On Conscience", Theological Monthly, VII (February, 1927), p. 33.

<sup>42</sup>Meyer, op. cit., p. 121.

conscience can act "between one another." <sup>43</sup> Hoeferkamp thus gives this as his meaning of verse 15:

The meaning of verse 15, then, is simply this: On the Last Day, in the Judgment, the Gentiles will show that what the Law requires has been written on their hearts when their conscience stands over against their own ego and passed judgment on what they have done, and when the Gentiles accuse or else exonerate one another. <sup>44</sup>

The interpretation of verse 16 also poses a difficult problem, for it is not clear with which preceding verse this description of the final Judgment by Christ is to be taken. The Authorized Version of the Bible connects verse 16 with verse 12, and makes verse 13 to 15 a kind of parenthesis, a view that is taken by a number of commentators. Others deny any connexion between verses 15 and 16, and maintain that the latter verse begins a new section. It should be noted, too, that verse 15 refers to things going on continually, as the tenses indicate, while verse 16 points to Judgement Day. There does not seem to be any close connexion between these two verses, for this reason. We shall pass over the other problems that beset the expositor in interpreting this verse, for example, the establishment of the correct text, the tense of κρίνω, etc., because we do not believe the real meaning of the passage is seriously affected by these considerations. We believe it best to connect verse 15 with verse 16, despite the difficulties mentioned above. And as Lenski

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<sup>43</sup>Hoeforkamp, op. cit., p. 664.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 664.

advocates, the apparent difficulties that beset this interpretation largely disappear when we give <sup>2</sup> the meaning it often has in the Koine, "in connexion with." The idea of the verse, then, is this: The "accusing and excusing" of verse 15 does not only concern the heathen for the moment, but it is "in connexion with the day." Even the heathen, then, feel that the great Day of Judgement is coming. And the "judging" of verse 16 will not only take place on Judgement Day, but is going on all the time "in connexion with that Day."<sup>45</sup> In connexion with that great Day, God judges the secrets of men; and when the Day itself arrives, God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, who is the Judge, according to Paul's gospel, which, of course, is the Gospel of Jesus Christ that Paul was commissioned to preach.

In reconstructing the teaching of Romans 2: 14-16, then, we observe these points:

1. There are Gentiles that have not the written Mosaic Law, yet who do the things that the Law requires.
2. They do so by nature, for natural man finds in himself a knowledge of the Divine Law.
3. They reveal this innate knowledge of the Law because they do the work of the Law, which God has written in their hearts.
4. In addition, man's conscience judges his actions with respect to that Law, and bears further witness to the Law and its demands.

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<sup>45</sup> Lenski, op. cit., pp. 172 ff.

5. On the Day of Judgement these Gentiles will show that what the Law requires has been written on their hearts when their conscience passes judgement on what they have done, and when the Gentiles accuse or else excuse one another.
6. That the Gentiles too, have some knowledge of that Great Day and what it will bring.

Accordingly, we have no doubt that this passage clearly teaches that natural man has some knowledge of the Divine Law. Just to what extent he knows that Law we are not told. But it is evident from the three passages already studied that this knowledge of God and of His Law is weak and faltering; that it is a mere faint echo or a tiny spark of the heavenly knowledge possessed by man before the fall; that it is in no wise a spiritual power; that it is ignored, neglected, corrupted and debased by man. Yet, we cannot get away from the fact that these Romans passages insist that it is in man, and that natural man is without excuse. At the same time, we cannot help noting the connexion in which Paul teaches his doctrine of Natural Theology : it is to show how desperately natural man needs God's revelation of Himself in the written Word. Whereas if man is left merely with his natural knowledge of God he will surely be under the wrath of God eternally, only with the Christian revelation of God, accepted in faith, can man find God and live with Him.

## CHAPTER IV

### AN EVALUATION OF NATURAL THEOLOGY IN LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

In bringing this paper to a close we observe in retrospect that, although not every aspect of our subject has been investigated, sufficient evidence has been produced to substantiate these observations: First, in answer to our question whether there is such a doctrine in Lutheran theology that claims for man an innate knowledge of God and of the Divine Law, the answer is: Yes! It is found in the Lutheran Confessions, and it has been consistently taught by the Church's most eminent theologians from Luther to Pieper.

Secondly, although we find that some of the Lutheran theologians have implemented a certain amount of philosophical terminology in the formulation of their respective teachings on Natural Theology, yet the basis of their teaching is Scriptural rather than philosophical. In other words, they taught Natural Theology because they found it taught in the Scriptures and not because they found it in Aristotle, Aquinas and others.

Thirdly, with regard to the most important question whether the content of Natural Theology in Lutheran Theology is soundly Scriptural, our study has shown that with the Scriptures the Lutheran Confessions and the Church's theologians consulted point both to the existence of Natural

Theology in man, and at the same time to its severe limitations. Never is it claimed that this Natural Knowledge of God and of His Law is clear, full, adequate; rather, it is emphasized again and again that it is the very opposite: obscure, fragmentary, and wholly inadequate to reveal who the true God is in His essence and His nature, His will and His works, particularly what He has done for man's salvation. All this can be learned only through God's revelation of Himself in His Word.

If the historic Lutheran doctrine of Natural Theology is, therefore, so securely founded, one might ask, in conclusion: Why, then, is the validity of the doctrine challenged today? While a careful analysis of his question is without the scope of this paper, and while one can draw attention to a number of tendencies that might have a bearing on the issue, we believe that only one view warrants any serious consideration. This is the view that acknowledges the validity of the historic Lutheran teaching in this respect that it teaches an innate knowledge of God and of the Divine Law, and that this knowledge is implanted in the human breast by God Himself, but which rejects the theory that man on his own initiative can gain this knowledge through his contemplation of the works of creation and his perception of God's activity in world affairs.

Now, it is true that, while Luther and the Confessions, as our survey of them has shown, give no indication of this tendency, it does appear in some of the later Lutheran

theologians, who taught an "acquired" as well as an "innate" knowledge of God and of the Divine Law. On this account the theologians concerned have been accused of drawing their material from philosophic sources, since it is maintained that the Scriptures teach no "acquired" Natural Theology.

Our view is that the "error" of the Lutheran theologians concerned is not so great as some make it appear, because they certainly aimed at presenting Scripture truth, and because they always, to our knowledge, associated the "acquired" as proceeding from the "innate" knowledge of God; never did they maintain that man's natural knowledge of God and His Law is derived solely through personal inference and acquisition. Thus Pieper, whom we may take as spokesman for the accused theologians says:

Is the natural knowledge of God innate (innata) or acquired (acquisita)? It is both. That it is innate is evident from Rom. 2:15. . . . But man can exercise and increase his innate knowledge by contemplating the universe, and thus it becomes notitia Dei acquisita (acquired knowledge of God).<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, we feel that this is possibly an overstatement of the Scripture teaching on Natural Theology. As our investigation of the loci classici for the doctrine in the New Testament revealed, it cannot be claimed with any degree of certainty that man does either wholly or partly, by his own efforts, find God. Rather, the position seems to be

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<sup>1</sup>Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), p. 373.

the very opposite: he ought to, but he does not; God expects it, and will surely hold man without excuse. And yet, there is something unsatisfying and perplexing about the whole matter, no matter how one views it.

Accordingly, we set our mind at rest, and at the same time round off our discussion with these eloquent words of one of the outstanding theologians in the Lutheran Church today, words that are soundly Scriptural and Lutheran:

The Christian believes, then, that there is a natural knowledge of God, implanted in the human breast by God Himself. Just how that was and is done he can afford to leave in abeyance. The theologian, too, who has some philosophical and psychological knowledge, looks down from the lofty citadel of God's Word upon the welter of epistemological and psychological theories that are brought into play at this juncture without distress and without too much perplexity. . . . He knows that the ideas of God and of God's Law are somehow in man, however blurred and vague, because God put them there, even though the How escapes his exact cognition and definition. Nor is the theologian nonplussed by the scepticism and the amusement with which many modern psychologists treat the suggestion of intuitive, innate, inborn ideas; for that is the explanation which many Christians who meditate upon this question will be inclined to accept as probably true. All who really believe the Bible to be Divine Truth believe what it teaches on the corruption of man's nature since the Fall. They believe that sin . . . the "radical evil," to speak with Kant, is born with man and is in him. . . . Believing this, we experience no greater psychological difficulty in believing the Scripture teaching of the natural knowledge of God and of God's Law which remains in sinful man after the Fall. . . . It is there; and the writer knows of no better explanation - if indeed any human explanation can be adequate - than to regard it as an innate, intuitive idea implanted by God, no matter when and where. Some may prefer to waive every attempt at explanation and to say of this matter as of the entire mystery of the human soul: Ignoramus et ignorabimus.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>H. Hamann, "Kant, Heine, and Theology on the Proofs for the Existence of God," Australian Theological Review, XXIII (September, 1952), pp. 58, 59.

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