

*A Biblical Case for Natural Law*, by David VanDrunen. Published by Acton Institute, 2006. Paperback, 75 pages, list price \$6.00. Reviewed by Mid-America Reformed Seminary prof. Nelson D. Kloosterman.

David VanDrunen, a professor at Westminster Seminary California (Ph.D., Loyola University Chicago), has authored this premier contribution to the Studies in Christian Social Ethics and Economics series sponsored by Acton Institute, a Catholic-Protestant think tank in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His thesis is that since all people know the basics of right and wrong at the core of their being, Christians need a biblical defense of natural law in order to understand the implications of this reality for public life.

VanDrunen uses the doctrine of man as image of God to support the notion that natural law provides a general framework (not exhaustive moral guidance) for living the moral life. Although humanity's fall into sin makes special revelation necessary for knowing the way of salvation in Christ, VanDrunen argues that natural law is still present in the world, that fallen humanity still knows natural law (though in a corrupted fashion), and that natural law continues to have positive usefulness today.

VanDrunen maintains that God rules over all things, but in two different ways. Through common grace, God governs the civil kingdom (politics, law, culture) as creator and sustainer, whereas through special grace he governs the spiritual kingdom (salvation, the church) especially as redeemer in Christ. The standard of right and wrong in the civil kingdom is not Scripture, but natural law, since the Bible's moral teaching is addressed to the covenant community, not to the world. To lift biblical imperatives from their context of grace and redemption for use in the civil kingdom is to misuse the Bible.

Three concerns form the heart of my response: epistemology, the Noachic covenant, and ethics. (For a more detailed presentation of my concerns, see my forthcoming review in *Ordained Servant*.) For clarity, let us define *natural law* as "standards of moral knowledge and conduct unaided by special revelation."

### *Epistemology*

All sinners need special revelation to learn the way of salvation. However, special revelation is also required in order that sinners may rightly apprehend and interpret divine revelation in creation.

Even in Paradise our first parents required special revelation to discern God's will, since Genesis 1:28–30 was spoken to them by God, not discovered by them. This special revelation provided humanity with the criterion for assessing the validity of any moral evaluations of natural revelation. Scripture knows nothing of an independently functioning human reason, especially now that human understanding has been darkened by sin (Rom. 1:21).

### *The Noachic Covenant*

VanDrunen argues from the Noachic covenant in Genesis 9 that God created common space (the civil kingdom) for all people to pursue culture together, apart from particular religious convictions. However, he ignores several key features of this covenant.

First, it includes special revelation, which is required for correctly interpreting and applying this arrangement. Second, to describe the Noachic and Abrahamic covenants as universal and particular, respectively, is to confuse administration with purpose. Surely the Abrahamic covenant, though particular in administration, is cosmic in purpose, for the promise to Abraham envisions all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3). And the Noachic covenant,

though cosmic in administration, is particular in purpose, since God upholds the created order ultimately to redeem his people. Third, the author speaks of a “realm” of common grace, but the works of God’s beneficence in creation are under the rule of Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:22–23; Col. 1:17, 20; Heb. 1:2; 1 Cor. 8:6), whose redeeming work is indispensable for the unfolding of creation and the development of true culture. Rather than seeing the kingdom of God as narrower than the kingdom of this world, all of Scripture testifies to the cosmic dimension of Christ’s mediatorial work.

### *Ethics*

Scripture does indeed teach that there are standards of moral knowledge and conduct in the natural world. But in analyzing how those standards function after the Fall, VanDrunen does not provide sustained attention to Romans 1:18–19 or to relevant confessional testimonies.

Romans 1:18–19 says: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.” Unbelievers actively suppress, by their unrighteousness, the truth of God that can be known from creation. God has indeed provided general revelation, but people refuse to apprehend it properly.

The Belgic Confession (Art. 2) stipulates that the knowledge of God available from creation is “sufficient to convince men and leave them without excuse” (see also Art. 14). Although the Canons of Dort (III/IV.4) acknowledge that remnants of natural light do continue to exist in humanity after the Fall, they continue: “But this light of nature is far from enabling man to come to a saving knowledge of God and conversion to him—so far, in fact, that man does not use it rightly even in matters of nature and society. Instead, in various ways he {23} completely distorts this light, whatever its precise character, and suppresses it in unrighteousness. In doing so he renders himself without excuse before God.”

Likewise, the Westminster Confession of Faith (6.4): “From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.” Consonant with this, the Westminster Larger Catechism (Q/A 96) teaches: “The moral law is of use to unregenerate men, to awaken their consciences to flee from wrath to come, and to drive them to Christ; or, upon their continuance in the estate and way of sin, to leave them inexcusable, and under the curse thereof.”

The greatest defect in natural law theories, then, is the neglect, if not the denial, of the fallenness of human reason and human will. After the Fall, natural law and human conscience serve primarily to restrain wickedness and to render the unregenerate inexcusable before God. In the final analysis, the doctrine of the image of God will not bear the weight of VanDrunen’s case, since every aspect of unregenerate man as an image-bearer is in rebellion against God. Nor will the Noachic covenant supply adequate warrant, since sinners, apart from special revelation, always abuse the natural revelation available to them (please read Calvin’s commentary on 1 Corinthians 1:20 and 3:19).

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