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**THE BIBLE, LAW, AND FREEDOM:
BIBLICAL INSIGHTS INTO NATURAL LAW AND
HUMAN FREEDOMS**

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ABSTRACT: The Bible has strongly influenced the foundation and framework of the development of the Western legal system over the last two thousand years. Several key ideas that are critical to the legal frameworks of liberal democracies are deeply imbedded in Biblical history and teachings. In some instances, it is possible to show either the Biblical origins or strong Biblical influences on secular legal concepts. This paper looks at one such area of influence, that of an understanding of natural law theory. It examines the Biblical view of how natural law should operate to regulate, order, and limit civil authority in society. It also examines the role that natural law plays in revealing truths about God to the world, and the role it can serve as a basis for Christian apologetics.

I. A Higher Law: The Bible and Natural Law

A. Natural Law – An Introduction¹

Legal historians and philosophers are well acquainted with the idea of natural, or moral, law. Not to be confused with physical laws, such as gravity or electricity, natural law has to do with the belief that most human laws reflect a higher moral law. Human laws, insofar as they reflect or comport to this higher law, thus derive their authority not only from the human agency that passed the law, but also from the higher obligation that the state-created laws embody. The human law can be adjudged as good or bad, or just or unjust, depending on its consistency with the higher law.

How is Natural Law Discovered?

Natural law is basic and fundamental to human nature. While conceptually natural law is “out there,” practically it is discovered “in here”—either in society, or even from internal reflection or, more usually, from a combination of the two. It can be discovered by human reason in the study of history and human experience, without reference to either legal authority or special revelation. Natural law stands in contrast to a philosophy of positive law, which views

¹ In putting this introductory section together, I have drawn in part on entries, including “Natural Law” and “Antigone,” in *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 5th Ed. (Columbia University Press 1993).

laws as merely the creature of the enacting body, resting on its authority alone, limited to its jurisdiction, with no universal or enduring obligation.

Natural law has a long and distinguished history in Western thought, being the primary framework of legal analysis beginning with the Greeks. St. Thomas Aquinas brought natural law theory to greater influence in the west. His view that natural law was accessible by all persons, not just by the regenerate, created the intellectual underpinnings that eventually allowed for a separation of church and state.

Natural law played a central role in the development of Western constitutional democracies. An example is the natural-law opening of the U.S. Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights” Legal concepts such as judicial review, the division between law and equity, and, perhaps most obviously, natural rights, all have explicit roots in natural law. But because of the theological pre-suppositions of natural law, its association with a higher Being, it fell into philosophical disrepute in the 19th and 20th centuries under the impact of positivism, empiricism and materialism. Today, it is a distinct minority view of the law in law schools and the courts.

Still, it continues to have a strong influence, beyond that of its explicit acceptance, on the legal thinking of both layman and professionals. To say that a law is “unjust or unfair,” is to draw on natural law thinking. Under positivism, laws that are legally enacted are by definition valid. But even the most committed positivist has a hard time saying that all legally enacted laws are never unjust—that any sense of injustice is purely a personal bias or prejudice based on one’s upbringing. Most people have difficulty accepting that aversion and horror towards the atrocities of the Nazi regime, Stalin’s purges, or the Khmer Rouge’s killing fields is simply a matter of personal bias or prejudice.

So despite its apparent rejection, natural law theory has had a tremendous influence on the 20th century. The development of international law, human rights law, the civil disobedience of Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the creation of international tribunals of justice, such as the Nuremberg trials or the Bosnian war prosecutions—all draw their philosophical underpinnings from natural law theory. As one legal scholar put it, “the Western legal tradition has always been dependent, even in the heyday of the national state, on belief in the existence of

a body of law beyond the law of the highest political authority, once called divine law, then natural law, and recently human rights.”²

Origins of Natural Law Theory

Many would place the origins of natural law theory with the Greeks, especially with the Stoics. The playwright Sophocles is often credited with one of the first expressions of natural law in history or literature in his play *Oedipus at Colonus*. There he places in the mouth of Antigone, the sister of Polynices, a speech about the rights that nature itself attests to, which she uses to justify her defiance of the King’s command not to bury her slain brother.

Sophocles wrote between four and five hundred B.C. But while this was centuries before the development of the Christian west, it was still well after the first expression of natural law found in the Hebrew scriptures. Still, it would be erroneous to say that natural law originated with the Bible.³ Indeed, this would be a contradiction in terms. By definition, natural law is discoverable, to some degree or another, by humans everywhere without resort to special revelation. Thus, it is proper to say that the Bible attests to, or even illuminates, natural law, rather than that it is the foundation or point of origination of natural law.

Still, the Bible has played, and can play, an important role in providing insights into the extent, role and limits of natural law. These insights shed light on important legal questions of our day involving law and morality and church and state. Unlike special revelation, which is only accepted as authority by the faithful, the natural law speaks in terms that can be understood by all people. It uses arguments based on observable harms or impacts on individuals and society. Because of this, it can provide a basis for putting moral principles into secular legislation. Thus, understanding the contours of the natural law can help provide Christians a clearer view of where and when it is appropriate to bring their moral convictions to bear on questions of public policy.⁴

² Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* p. 45 (Harvard University Press 1983).

³ To say that the natural law is not a product of the Bible does not deny that the natural law emanates from God and His nature. It is merely to say, as discussed more fully below, that God does not speak exclusively through the Bible, but also reveals himself in the natural world.

⁴ The division of the Ten Commandments between the first four and the last six, with the former being duties to God, and the latter duties to other people, corresponds in some way to the

B. Old Testament Foundations – The Universality, Obligation, Judgment, & Content of the Natural Law.

Many Biblical doctrines are developed inductively, combining insights from narratives and stories, with reflections found in poetry and psalms, with propositional statements made in didactic literature. This is true of natural law. Like the existence of God, the Bible tends to assume the existence of natural law rather than setting out to prove it. Like oxygen in the air, or water in the ocean, natural law is assumed to be a vital, and obvious, part of the way the world works.

As the Psalmist puts it:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
 and the firmament shows His handiwork.
 Day unto day utters speech,
 And night unto night reveals knowledge.
 There is no speech nor language
 Where their voice is not heard.
 Their line has gone out
 Through all the earth,
 And their words to the end of the world.
 . . .
 The Law of the Lord is perfect,
 converting the soul.

Psalms 19:1-4, 7. (All Biblical quotes are from the New King James Version.)

This famous passage does not say much about the content of God’s revelation in nature, but it is plain regarding its universality. There is no “speech nor language” where it is not understood. All people everywhere have enough evidence upon which to base a conception of God and of their obligations under His moral law.

It is this universality of moral obligation that sets the foundation for the destruction of the entire earth by the worldwide flood. God sees that man everywhere is “corrupt,” and that the “earth was filled with violence.” Gen. 6:11-12. The punishment meted out seems based primarily on man’s mistreatment of his fellow man, rather than on violations of particular

obligations of natural and revealed law. The last six commandments contain principles that are properly enforced by human legislation, whereas the first four commandments are not an

religious obligations, such as Sabbath keeping or ritual sacrifices. The story does not dwell, however, on the specifics of the wrongdoing, or the nature of the moral messages that Noah undoubtedly preached. For a more explicit appearance of the natural law, we must move on to Abraham.

Abraham Bargains with God – The Divine Foundation of the Natural Law

Probably the first explicit appeal to natural law in the Bible appears in the story of Abraham and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. After the Lord appeared to Abraham and told him about the planned destruction of the cities, Abraham began his famous bargaining with God in an attempt to save the cities. While the story is a familiar one, the basis of the bargaining is perhaps not often closely considered. Abraham sets up what he believes will be a moral dilemma for God—that the destruction of the wicked will bring about the destruction of the righteous.

He thus appeals to that natural law axiom that even a four-year-old sister knows: “I didn’t do it! You can’t punish me for what my brother did.” As Abraham puts it, “would you also destroy the righteous with the wicked?” Gen. 18:23. He then proposes that if there “were fifty righteous” in the city, that God should spare it. And then Abraham makes his strongest case as to why God should do this: “Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! *Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*” Gen. 18:25 (NKJV) (emphasis added).

Abraham’s simple statement has profound implications for the natural law. Notably, there is Abraham’s call for God to do right. This implies that God’s will is not alone the only measure of right. In other words, right is not right because God does it; but God chooses to do that which is right. If right were defined as whatever God chose, then Abraham would have no basis on which to challenge God. Whatever God did, by definition would be right. God’s will, combined with his absolute might, would be the ultimate standard of right.

But Abraham, who is the “friend of God,” and knows God as no man ever had, believes and knows that there is more to God than an omnipotent will. He knows that God has chosen to use that will in accordance with principles of right and fairness. This does not mean that there is

appropriate area for civil legislation.

a law outside and above God, which He must obey. But it does mean that He is committed to a set of principles and characteristics internal to Himself—part of His makeup—which will guide His use of power.

Thus, natural law is part of the divine nature and character—implicit not only in the ordering of the world and the universe, but in the nature of God himself. These truths carry profound implications for human rulers. First, might does not make right. There is a higher law that defines right and wrong, justice and injustice. Second, if God himself has chosen to obligate Himself to act consistently with that law, human rulers certainly have a duty to do likewise. Third, as God is enduring and eternal and universal, so are these principles. They must be considered by all rulers, at all times, and in all places.

Natural Law in the Wisdom Literature – The Judgment of the Natural Law

This duty and obligation is set out clearly in the wisdom literature of ancient Israel. Personified as wisdom, the law that God used to bring the world into being, and to structure it properly and righteously, is viewed as the same laws that humans are to seek out and apply in the process of running society. “The Lord possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. I have been established from everlasting, from the beginning, before there was ever an earth. When there was no depths, I was brought forth.” Prov. 8:22-24.

This same, ancient wisdom, also cries out to humanity. “Does not wisdom cry out, and understanding lift her voice? She takes her stand on the top of the high hill, besides the way, where the paths meet. She cries out by the gates, at the entry of the city, at the entrance of the doors” Prov. 8:1-3. The ability, indeed the duty, of all persons to listen to, indeed to strive for, this wisdom, this understanding of natural law, is made equally plain: “Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting at the posts of my doors. For whoever finds me finds life, and obtains favor of the Lord.” Prov. 8:34-35.

Leaders and rulers are especially called on to seek after this wisdom. “By me kings reign, and rulers decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles, all the judges of the earth.” Prov. 8:1-3, 15-16. Indeed, when rulers exercise their roles in applying the moral law to their subjects, they are seen as participating or sharing in a Divine role. Usually when people speak of judges or rulers as “playing God,” it is intended pejoratively—an accusation usually reserved for criticizing decisions about the beginning or ending of life. But the Bible uses the phrase in a way

that suggests that certain people, civil rulers, are given the role and responsibility of “playing gods” in the context of applying moral law to society.

God stands in the congregations of the mighty
 He judges among the gods.
 How long will you judge unjustly,
 And show partiality to the wicked?

...
 I said, “You are gods,
 And all of you are children of the Most High,
 But you shall die like men,
 And fall like one of the princes.
 Arise, O God, judge the earth”

Psalm 82:1-2, 6-7.

Rulers have the god-like role of understanding and applying the natural law to their subjects, of bringing justice and the rule of law to society. But the Bible makes it clear that the rulers themselves will be judged on the rightness of their rulings by God Himself. He will hold them to account for their use or abuse of the natural law. They are stewards of the power they have been given, and are required to exercise it according to principles of justice and fairness. Indeed, the Bible records instances where God executes judgment because rulers and nations have violated the natural law. But usually these judgments do not come without some explicit warning through a prophet.

The Prophets and Natural Law – A Message for the Gentiles

Israel was the repository of God’s specially revealed law, the “oracles of God,” as Paul puts it in Romans. Rm. 3:2 Prophets to the nation of Israel rebuked God’s people for ignoring and violating these specially revealed principles. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and other prophets preached against a wide-range of sins that included Sabbath-breaking, idol worship, violation of laws regarding sacrifice and cleanliness, as well as sexual immorality, theft, and oppression of the poor.

But the Hebrew prophets did not just speak to the nation of Israel. A number of them spoke to surrounding nations, including Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Ninevah. But the prophets’ messages to these surrounding nations differed from those delivered to Israel. These

surrounding nations were not generally called to account for violations of God's special revelation. They were not rebuked for violating the Sabbath, omitting sacrifices, or ritual practices. Rather, the gentile nations were held to account for crimes and sins against humanity. Violations, in other words, of the natural law.

A good example of this is the prophet Amos, who rebukes six foreign nations before moving on to the nations of Judah and Israel. Amos 1-2. He rebukes Damascus for violent war crimes; Gaza for imprisoning a whole nation; Tyre for violating a treaty with Edom; Edom for violence against Israel; Ammon for abusing women in battle; and Moab, in a foreshadowing of Sophocles and Antigone's burial of her brother, for desecrating enemy war dead. But when he comes to Judah, he rebukes them directly for violating the "law of the Lord" and "His commandments." Am. 2:4. Likewise, He rebukes Israel for spiritual violations, giving the Nazarites wine to drink, and telling the prophets to keep quiet. Am. 2:12.

He also rebukes Judah and Israel for crimes against humanity; they too are subject to the natural law. And though the gentile nations are not held accountable for special revelation, they are held to account for violations of the generally accessible moral law. God both judges and ordains their punishments for these violations. And He calls various leaders and prophets among His chosen people to declare to these other nations their violations of God's natural, moral law. Another well know example of these missions of judgment to the Gentiles being Jonah's mission to the Ninevites, who reproved them for the "violence that was in their hands." Jonah 3:8

Sodom and the Content of Natural Law – Sexual Sins and Social Welfare

Jonah may be the most famous Old Testament missionary to the Gentiles, but it is the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah that is, at least next to that of the flood, the highest-profile judgment based on natural law. And we know a good bit more about the specific moral wrongs for which Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed than we know from the flood story.

The most infamous crime for which the cities are remembered is memorialized in our modern word for homosexual intercourse—sodomy. The story of Lot's flight from Sodom reveals a city filled with uncontrolled sexual desire and violence—as Lot defends his angelic visitors against a mob bent on homosexual rape. Gen. 19:5-11. Some have suggested that it was

Sodom's violence rather than its acceptance of homosexuality that brought down divine judgment. But this is not borne out elsewhere in the Bible.

Jude mentions the destruction of Sodom as being based on its citizens "having given themselves over to sexual immorality and gone after strange flesh . . ." Jude 7. While there is a clear reference to homosexual activity in the text, it is silent as to any accompanying violence. The perverted sexual activity is seen as a sufficient basis for the judgment and destruction. This story provides a clear message that issues of sexual immorality, including homosexuality, are part of the general moral law for which God holds all nationals accountable.

Not that this means there were not other reasons for the destruction of Sodom. The prophet Ezekiel spoke of Sodom's destruction as a warning for Samaria. He warned: "Look, this was the iniquity of your sister Sodom: She and her daughter had pride, fullness of food, and abundance of idleness; neither did she strengthen the hand of the poor and needy." -Ez. 16:49. Ezekiel also acknowledges that Sodom "committed abominations," undoubtedly a reference that includes sexual immorality. But the thrust of his message is one of failure on issues we might call social justice—apathy in the face of a society split between haves and have-nots.

It is clear from the story of Sodom alone that the natural law is not one that hews to the line of any contemporary political ideology. Modern conservatives may applaud the message regarding sexual immorality and homosexuality; they will be less open to the notion of "strengthening the hand of the poor and needy." Liberals will applaud the social justice message; but will be disconcerted, even alienated, by the frank message of judgment on sexual behavior. Attempts by individual Christians or the church to apply the moral law to problems of society today must take into account both these aspects of the natural law. Both aspects are prominent themes of the Biblical prophets. To ignore one or the other causes will result in an unbalanced message that will either unnecessarily offend or inappropriately comfort.

C. New Testament and Natural Law – Christ, Paul and the Early Church

Perhaps because the New Testament is less concerned with issues of civil governance than the Old, the natural law is viewed more in the context of apologetics rather than governance. But it does make some very important appearances, including passages that link Christ to the

natural law, that underscores the continuing moral obligation on all people of the natural law, and that highlight the role that civil rulers play as stewards of power under the natural law.

Jesus Christ - Embodiment of the Natural Law

It is the apostle John, who writes the most simple yet profound gospel, who identifies Christ with the natural law. In the opening to his gospel he speaks of the Word that was with God, and that was God, and that made all things, and he identifies that Word as Christ. Jn. 1:1-2, 14. Typically, Christian theologians think of Christ as the most special of all “special” revelation. The ultimate, divine disclosure of who God really is in the form of His Son, who bears His express image.

And indeed, this is true. But in the same passage John also identifies Christ as the ultimate in general, or natural revelation. “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.” Jn. 1:4 He says it was Christ “that was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.” Jn. 1:9. While Christ in the flesh came only to a relatively few people for a few short years, John says that he “gives light to every man” Even if one were to take into account the insights into Christ’s coming provided by the Jewish sacrificial system of types, this system was not to “every man.” There were nations, even entire civilizations, that did not have contact with the Jewish religion.

Even if one traces substitutionary sacrifices back to Noah, from whom sprang all subsequent nations, it is clear that not all nations or civilizations kept this information sufficiently alive to understand that it pointed to a Christ figure. John’s statement only makes sense in the context of the general, moral, natural law well attested to in the Old Testament. It was Christ, the Word and Light of Divine information and order and principle, that all people and nations everywhere have relied on to carry out the task of fairly and justly ordering their societies and lives.

In this profound passage, John also reveals the relationship between general and special revelation. While all people everywhere have relied on Christ in building their societies, governments, and cultures, due to the ignorance of sin and the blindness of fall human nature, they have not seen Christ in this. As John puts it, while all men have been given light, “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. . . .” Jn. 1:5 That is why John

was sent, “to bear witness of the Light, that all through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light.” Jn. 1:7-8.

John is a prophet, perhaps in this passage a figure of all the prophets, who bear special revelation from God to explain eternal truths that humanity would not otherwise understand. The natural law has its limits, and it is only as the natural law is illuminated by special revelation that the spiritual truths contained in the natural world can be seen. The natural law can be used crudely to administer justice in civil society. But with all its weaknesses, failings, and sin, humanity has a great deal of difficulty reading the moral obligations of the natural law aright, especially as it relates to eternal interests. Thus, it is necessary for the prophets to speak and to shed the light of special revelation on the truths of natural law.

This passage might help clarify the goal of the church’s evangelistic outreach. At times it seems we view evangelism as bringing entirely new systems of truths to people entirely ignorant of truth. Perhaps we would have more success if we viewed evangelism as, at least in part, providing Biblical insights into truths people half knowingly hold or have experienced. Joining the church could be viewed less as an entry into an alien and foreign world, and more as an awakening from a sad dream that contained fuzzy hints of a real, better world.

It is true that as our society becomes more and more perverted and corrupt, people will have less and less sense of these natural truths. But Christ himself, in a highly corrupt time, based many of his teachings on the common life experiences of those around Him, whether it be the toil of farmers and herdsman, the scheming of businessmen, or the daily duties of housewives.

Paul and the Natural Law – Condemnation, Vindication, and Outreach

The strongest Biblical statements on the universality of, obligations under, and judgments associated with, the natural law are found in the writings of Paul. Despite being the most prolific channel of special revelation, Paul did not hesitate to refer to and rely upon general revelation when appropriate. His most extended exposition is found in Romans one and two, where he talks about the judgment facing the whole world for its ungodliness.

In his clearest statement on the natural law and what can be discerned from it, he writes:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.

Rm. 1:18-20.

This knowledge of God, seen from nature, serves as the basis of knowledge regarding basic moral issues, including, Paul specifically notes, homosexuality. As the knowledge of God is consciously rejected, the knowledge of right and wrong disappears as well. “And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting.” Rm. 1:28. The list of things “not fitting” include: sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness, envy, murder, strife, deceit, pride, boasting, disobedient to parents, unforgiving and unmerciful. Rm. 1:28-30.

But Paul does not view the natural law only as an instrument of condemnation. To those who do not have the oracles of God, the natural law can play a role in their ultimate salvation, causing them, in response to the Holy Spirit, to see their sinfulness and need of faith in a Higher Power. “For when the Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.” Rm. 2:12-16.

Once again, Paul’s positive estimation of natural law should warn us against belittling it or terming it unnecessary once we have special revelation. We do disservice to the natural law if we disparage it as redundant in the face of revealed truth. It is true that special revelation gives much clearer pictures of God and His truth. But natural law, properly understood and used, can be a bridge to bring unbelievers to appreciate the truths of special revelation—it provides the common ground upon which apologetics can be built.

Paul, in invoking the unknown god of the Athenians, made a classic appeal to natural law, of the God in Whom “we live and move and have our being.” Acts 17:28. He used the Greek poet’s conception of this God to build a bridge to his proclamation of Christ, which while

not widely successful, did win some precious souls. Acts 17:32-34. Natural law should not determine Christian doctrine—that is the sole domain of the scriptures—but it can guide as to how to communicate and explain that doctrine to the world. Thus, natural law can help meet Peter’s admonition to “give a defense to everyone who asks you *a reason* for the hope that is in you.” 1 Pet. 3:15.

Christians and the Civil Authorities – Limits of Power

The confrontation between Christianity and Rome was prefigured when Christ stood before Pilate. It is the apostle John, once again, who gives us the most nuanced insight into the confrontation between the two figures. The 18 and 19 chapters of John recount the drama, as a calm, gentle, yet principled Christ encounters the pressured, wily, pragmatic Pilate. The only issue that will give Pilate legitimate authority over this case is if Christ is guilty of some civil or political crime, of sedition against Caesar. But under close questioning, Christ reveals that he has no worldly aspirations of authority. His kingdom is not of this world; it is one for the cause of truth. “Everyone,” He says, “who is of the truth hears My voice.” Jn. 18:37.

As every judge must, Pilate has the last word, and asks “What is truth?” But it is an empty rhetorical question, a mere verbal flourish to avoid dealing with Christ’s statement. Because Pilate knows what the truth is for him, and that is that Christ is not guilty of any crime that Pilate can punish him for. Without waiting for an answer, he walks out and tells the Jews as much: “I find no fault in Him at all.” Jn. 18:38.

But Pilate’s statement is not a bold declaration of truth. Rather, it is prelude to equivocation—a compromise with truth—which he hopes will pacify the crowd. He immediately offers to release either Christ or Barabbas to the crowd for Passover. The offer is, of course, inconsistent with his declaration regarding Christ’s innocence, and it emboldens the mob, and further weakens Pilate.

In hopes of heading the Jews off, Pilate has Christ scourged. He then presents Him to the people, once again declaring “I find no fault in Him.” The growing inconsistency between Pilate’s understanding of the immediate truth of the natural law, that Christ was an innocent man, and his punitive actions towards Christ, fills Pilate with tension and anxiety. This anxiety is only

heightened when the Jews reveal that Christ claimed to be “the Son of God.” Pilate again comes to Christ and asks him “where are you from?”

Christ gives no answer to this question. It is as though Pilate’s continuing rejection of natural law, of what he already knows to be right and wrong, disqualifies him from learning greater spiritual truths of special revelation. Pilate’s response to Christ’s silence, and Christ’s reply, encapsulates Christian thought on the limits of civil authorities in relation to the church and personal freedom.

When Christ refuses to answer, Pilate threatens Him. “Are you not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release you?” Jn. 19:10 Pilate resorts to threats of arbitrary punishment, in order to cow Christ into speech. Christ’s response is instructive for civil rulers everywhere: “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above.” Jn. 19:11.

Christ’s statement powerfully reminded Pilate that he had no basis to make arbitrary threats. Pilate did not own the law; he did not create or possess his own power. Rather, he was a steward of power. His power was literally from above, both in an earthly and a heavenly sense. He was a subordinate of Caesar, and was expected to carry out due-process according to Roman law, which did not allow for the flogging or crucifixion of innocent men. He was also a subordinate of God, and responsible under the natural law for carrying out justice according to fixed principles. He had violated these principles, and was on the verge of doing so again.

It was Christ’s last appeal to Pilate; a last sermon to a man about to walk into darkness. And it was based on the truths of natural law, applied to a particular instance of justice. For Pilate, rejecting or accepting the testimony of natural law was literally the same as rejecting or accepting the person of Jesus Christ. For others facing dilemmas involving the natural law, the connection with Christ may be less obvious, but no less true. In some sense, in encouraging people to behave honestly, justly, and fairly, we are encouraging them to accept, in some way, the principles of Christ. Not that they are saved by these actions, but that these responses will help shape how they do respond when they are confronted more explicitly with Christ.

Pilate clearly understood Christ’s message, at least its temporal aspects, as John records that “From then on Pilate sought to release Him.” But the Jews cried out all the more, saying that if he let Christ go, “you are not Caesar’s friend.” Jn. 19:12. This is the undoing of Pilate.

His course of compromise has left him in no position to resist this final threat to his position: to do the right thing could cost him his political standing and career. In order to retain Caesar's favor, he violates Caesar's principles—allowing an innocent man to be crucified.

There are a number of different stories about the ultimate fate of Pilate. The most fitting, however, is the one that records that a few years after the trial of Christ, Pilate carried out a mass trial and execution of certain Jewish zealots. He did so, the story goes, without following proper procedure, and he was called to Rome to answer for his miscarriage of justice by the emperor. The story ends with him either being executed or languishing in prison for the rest of his life—a fitting end for someone who was an unworthy steward of power. If this was truly Pilate's fate, Christ's words about his power “being from above” undoubtedly haunted him on every step of his journey back to Rome.

Christ's challenge to Pilate becomes the challenge of all Christians to all rulers in all ages: “Your power has been given you from above.” Thus, it is limited in scope, it cannot be exercised arbitrarily, and you will be held accountable for its misuse—either in this world or the world to come. The limits involve respecting the division between God's realm and Caesar's realm. “Render,” Christ had said, “to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.” Lk. 20:25. Obligations to God should not be hindered or infringed or claimed by Caesar. Thus, the disciples told the Jerusalem authorities that “we ought to obey God rather than man,” when ordered not to preach about Christ. Acts 5:29.

Paul's very positive statements about being “subject” to the “governing authorities” in the 13th chapter of Romans is premised on the government playing its legitimate role. It applies to rulers who “are not a terror to good works, but to evil,” to those who are “God's minister to you for good.” Rm. 13:3-4. Those rulers that exceed these limits, are justly subject to the rebuke and reminder that Christ brought to Pilate—your power is not your own, but given you from above.

D. Conclusion – Natural Law, Civil Freedom & Apologetics

As described in the Bible, natural law does not set out an exhaustive list of what rights, liberties, and freedoms exist, or what conduct should be illegal. That is what the hard work of legislating, lawyering, judging is about. What it does provide is a system and framework which make rights and freedoms possible. The idea of a rule of law, that law is not merely the opinion

of the strongest, or best armed, or the biggest group, is reliant on the notion of natural law. This idea itself, that some sort of neutral principles of justice should govern society, is probably the most basic and fundamental building block in creating a free society. It provides the framework and backdrop in which the harder work of making the particular lists can happen.

The Bible does make clear that moral judgments must be made about appropriate behavior in society, and appropriate restrictions created, or divine judgement will result. Christians today, as the Hebrew prophets of old, have a responsibility to bring their moral insights to bear to encourage, exhort and even rebuke society for its failings regarding the natural moral law. Insights as to what these moral issues might be can be gained from the Bible, but in their presentation to society, the focus should include the negative societal impact, the natural law arguments, as well as the fact of scriptural denunciation.

This paper has uncovered two aspects, or two roles, of natural law. The first is that of guide to civil rulers and judges who must pass, interpret, and enforce laws to govern civil society. This civil role of the natural law is the primary focus or emphasis of Old Testament teachings on the natural law. The second role is that of revealer of truths about God, His existence, His power, and moral requirements to all individuals. This is the role of the natural law that the New Testament is most concerned with. This is natural law as providing a basis or foundation for evangelism and apologetics.

These two roles overlap to some degree, as what the natural law says to civil rulers can also be a type of apologetic; and what the natural law says to the individual conscience can be the basis of civil obligation. Perhaps the more important point is that the Bible envisions a continuity between natural law and revealed law. That all truth is God's truth, and that rightly understood, both natural and special revelation speak in harmony. As Ellen White eloquently put it in the book *Education*:

The world has had its great teachers, men of giant intellect and extensive research, men whose utterances have stimulated thought and opened to view vast fields of knowledge; and these men have been honored as guides and benefactors of their race; but there is One who stands higher than they. We can trace the line of the world's teachers as far back as human records extend; but the Light was before them. As the moon and the stars of our solar system shine by the reflected light of the sun, so, *as far as their teaching is true, do the world's great thinkers reflect the rays of the Sun of*

Righteousness. Every gleam of thought, every flash of the intellect, is from the Light of the world.⁵

Indeed, she says that an honest study of the truths of the natural world will bring us into touch with God Himself.

In a knowledge of God all true knowledge and real development have their source. Wherever we turn, in the physical, the mental, or the spiritual realm; in whatever we behold, apart from the blight of sin, this knowledge is revealed. *Whatever line of investigation we pursue, with a sincere purpose to arrive at truth, we are brought in touch with the unseen, mighty Intelligence that is working in and through all.*⁶

It is this aspect of natural law that will do the greatest work for freedom. Civil freedom is certainly to be cherished; but spiritual freedom is of ultimate value. As the natural law leads the honest seeker on to God's specially revealed truths of grace, forgiveness, and freedom from the bondage of sin, Christ's words come to pass: "you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Jn. 8:32

⁵ Ellen G. White, *Education* 13-14 (2002) (emphasis added).

⁶ *Id.* at 14 (emphasis added).