

How Far Can You Go with the Natural Knowledge of God?

“Christian, Muslim, Hindu? It doesn’t matter. We all believe in the same God.” “I don’t need to go to church to find God. I can find God in nature.” “I don’t believe in God and yet I do just as many good works as my Christian neighbor across the street. However, I do them to benefit society and facilitate the positive evolution of humanity.” We, as Christians, readily disagree with these statements. The way one views God does matter. The avenues explored to find God are of great significance. The reasons one does works of charity matter. However, the common denominator in the statements quoted above is that they all reveal an inherent, natural knowledge of God. Whether through works of creation or the Moral Law imprinted on the heart, all people, to a certain extent, have a true knowledge of God (Romans 1:25). God has given to mankind a true knowledge of himself for their benefit. Therefore it behooves us to examine the extent of the natural knowledge of God. How far can people go with it?

First of all, to what extent can one *know* God? The Bible says that man “knew God” (Rom. 1:21). This is not just a factual knowledge of God. This is an experiential knowledge (ginwskw). In Rom. 1:20 it says, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his *eternal power and divine nature* have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” From the beauty, order, and complexity of the world mankind gathers that there must be an immensely powerful and wise being who created it. And the only one who could create such a world is a divine, supernatural “being”; one who is invisible, immortal and glorious. As humans observe creation, they notice that this divine entity preserves the world and sustains the creatures in it by giving them rains and seasons with which to grow their crops (Acts 14:17). Only a good, kind and loving being can do such things.

People also inherently understand that this god demands obedience from them. “Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are *written on their hearts*” [italics mine] (Rom.2: 14,15). Furthermore, each one realizes that if he disobeys this law, God will punish him. Romans 1:32 states, “Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death...” (Rom. 1:32). Their conscience accuses them when they do something wrong and defends them when they follow God’s law.

So from the natural knowledge of God, “man knows 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” (Pieper 371). This would seem to be quite an extensive knowledge of the essence of God. However, Scripture does reveal to man things about God he cannot know via his own reasoning. The Bible tells us that God is triune, i.e. three persons in one God (Matt. 28:19,20). Only through Scripture do we learn the good and tremendously important news that God is a Savior God. “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16).

The natural knowledge of God reveals more than just the existence of the latter. Whereas a god might only have power over the crops or the seas, creation testifies that the Creator has unlimited power. In Rom. 1:25, Paul terms the worship of idols a “lie” as opposed to the natural knowledge of God which is truth. Obviously people who worshipped idols didn’t think that the actual images were gods, but that a god somehow dwelt in them (cf. Acts 17:24). But humans, by nature, know better than to constrict God’s divine nature by temples and images. By their

very nature, they know better than to split God up into many different gods. The problem is they willingly and obstinately go *against* what they know. Because unregenerate man does so, God speaks of this natural knowledge as sufficient grounds to condemn man (Rom.1:18).

Again, to what extent can one know God? Some have answered (Lawrenz 67, Stoeckhart 61) that the natural knowledge of God is a true knowledge of God as far as it goes. This might seem like they are avoiding the question, but it is simply asserting what Scripture says.

Whatever we can learn from creation and the law imprinted on our hearts (that God is Creator, Ruler, Preserver, Holy Judge), this is the extent of our natural knowledge of God. Take the Muslims for example. They believe that God is the Creator and Preserver of the universe and that he will reward those who obey his commands and punish those who do evil. Luther states, “The reason and wisdom of God may go so far as to reach the conclusion, although feebly, that there must be *one eternal divine being*, who has created and who preserves and governs all things” [italics mine] (Pieper 380).

Since the natural knowledge of God cannot reveal to us that God is our Savior, why does Paul say in Acts 17 that God determined the times and places for the nations of the world so that men would “seek and find him?” (vss. 26,27) If we cannot, by nature, know God as Savior, how can we seek and find him? First of all, it must be asserted that the natural knowledge of God indeed does not know about God’s plan of salvation. In I Cor. 2:9 Paul, quoting Isaiah, says, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him, but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.” Only the Holy Spirit can reveal God as Savior, and the means he uses is not the natural knowledge of God but the gospel. In Rom. 1:17 Paul says, “For in the *gospel* a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.” [italics mine]

Perhaps the best way to explain to what extent people can seek and find God on his own would be to look at another passage of Paul which espouses the same principle. In Rom. 2:4, Paul asks, “Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you to repentance?” Here Paul says that God’s kindness, manifested in his providence and patience, ought to lead men to repentance. How can the natural knowledge of God lead men to repent? First, it must be determined whether Paul is speaking of repentance in the wide sense (contrition and faith) or the narrow sense (contrition). Since man cannot, by nature, come to faith in Jesus as his Savior, Paul is talking about repentance in the narrow sense, i.e. contrition. This agrees with the context. In the opening verses of Romans 2, Paul condemns the person who readily judges the sins of others yet fails to confess his own guilt. By pointing out God’s kindness, Paul is trying to lead this “judge” to repentance.

But how does God’s kindness convict a person? How does his providence and patience become a law that condemns? By pointing out the kindness and patience of God, Paul is showing the “judge” that he has no warrant to do so. Is God condemning the wickedness of men like the “judge” is? No! Rather, he is being patient with men. What, then, gives the “judge” the right to convict them? He, too, should be loving, kind and patient as God is. God’s kindness shows the “judge” that he is judging by the wrong standard. Instead of comparing himself to men he should be comparing himself to God. And when he realizes that he hasn’t been perfectly loving and kind and patient like God, he is convicted and logically led to repentance.

This is how this verse has been interpreted by Panning (32). However, others have understood the term “repentance” in the “wide” sense, i.e. repentance and faith. J.P. Meyer holds this view. Although Paul is condemning the “judge,” Meyer feels that deep down the “judge” really knows that he stands condemned. That is why Paul doesn’t have to list any

specific sins (98). When Paul points out to the “judge” God’s kindness and patience, he should become puzzled. He knows that he has not kept the law written in his heart and deserves death, and yet he observes that God is being patient with him and has not struck him down. Realizing on the one hand he cannot become right with God by obeying the law, and on the other hand that God is still being good to him, the “judge” ought to consider that God has provided another way for him to be saved. Meyer calls this “a token of God’s method of effecting a change of heart in man” (101). Granted, the providence and patience of God cannot produce full repentance (only the Gospel can do that). However, this goodness of God points or leads (Rom. 2:4) one in that direction.

So which interpretation is correct? Perhaps both. God’s goodness can both convict mankind by showing them the true standard they should live by, and at the same time suggest to them that there might be another way to be saved. Both would be steps toward “full” repentance. Both would be ways that natural man may seek God.

But again these are only “steps toward.” This is only “seeking.” How then can Paul say that men can “find” God (Acts:17:27)? Since people cannot discover God’s salvation on their own, we must limit ourselves to what we have already said mankind can know about God through natural knowledge. Lenski summarizes this nicely: “[This natural revelation] cannot save man; but it can and does reveal the existence of God, of his majesty, glory, omnipotence, omniscience, benefice, righteousness, and justice. So the expectation voiced by Paul is that, to say the least, men may indeed, touch and find him. Paul is speaking about what God has a right to expect, in fact the fullest right” (731). To this extent the creature can “find” the Creator. With this knowledge they should glorify and give him thanks (Rom. 1:21).

However, we see from Romans 1 that men do not glorify and give thanks to God as they should. From Romans 2 we see that men tragically fail even when they try to obey the natural law written in their hearts. Why, then, do men continue to try to fulfill the inscribed law even though they don't want to or know that they can't? The answer is the *opinio legis* ["opinion of the law" which tells all people they have to do something to curry God's favor]. The law imprinted on the heart from birth clearly convicts mankind that those who don't abide by this law deserve death (Rom.1:32). Since man knows that he hasn't lived up to this standard, he is afraid of God and the punishment merited by disobedience. Because man knows no other way to please an angry God, he continues in vain to try and keep the law. Although he knows he is not perfect, he hopes that these good deeds will perhaps appease an angry God. These good deeds also temporarily quiet an accusing conscience.

But is this the only reason man abides by the law? What about atheists, who deny the existence of God but continue to perform the outward works of the law? Why do they follow the inscribed law? The atheist answers by claiming he sees the value in keeping the law. Paul Peters, in an article entitled "What Is a Mature Morality," concludes, "only a society which is striving after ethical ends can realize the blessings of material progress and eliminate the dangers which are likely to accompany such changes" (223). God has assigned the natural law and civil ordinances the role of maintaining peace and order in the world to facilitate the forceful advance of the gospel. People understand that by establishing a government and obeying its laws societal order is preserved.

Mankind also abides by the laws written on their hearts because they see them as good. Luther himself noted that the early philosophers taught "that we should sooner die a thousand deaths than commit a shameful act, even if we knew that men would never know of it and God

would overlook it” (225). Human reason allows men to distinguish what is beneficial and useful. Some of these “good laws” are self-preservation, the love of family (Lk. 11:11-13), the love of friends (Matt. 5:46,47) and love for people in need (Lawrenz 73). Furthermore, when the good works of Christians lead men to praise God (Matt. 5:16), how could the heathen possibly do such good deeds unless they realized they were of some positive and noble value.

The intentions of mankind to do good are, of course, never perfect. Often men perform these outward works not for the sake of others but for their own sake. They desire praise, honor and rewards for doing them. Although Luther acknowledged that men have suggested that virtue is its own reward, he doubted whether anyone has ever followed through with this. Rather, men say and do these things for their own glory (226). When asked why people rush to the needs of their neighbor, a common response is something like this: “I would expect them to help me if I was in the same situation.”

The power of conscience must also be kept in mind. Although humans may deny that God exists, they still have that voice inside them that approves of or disapproves of their actions. Although they do not credit this voice to God, they nevertheless feel its force and act accordingly to quiet their consciences.

Trying to find out how far one can go with the natural knowledge of God might seem to be an exercise in futility. First of all, it is rather difficult to determine the exact pinnacle of our natural knowledge of God. On the one hand, natural man cannot know God as Savior, and yet he has enough knowledge that he should be able to seek and find, praise and thank Him. The most one can gain from his findings is not so easy to spell out. We know that natural man cannot do any works that are pleasing to God, and yet outwardly he fulfills some of the law’s demands. Why he performs these works is also difficult to determine. The reason it is difficult to pin down

the extent of natural knowledge's capabilities is because humans never make full use of this knowledge permeated by sinful hostility. Because of the sinful nature, people either abuse or suppress this knowledge rather than use it to learn more about God. This misuse of the natural knowledge gives God every reason to judge mankind. At the same time, this misuse provides Christians every reason to bring the gospel to all people. By studying and examining the natural knowledge of God, we can better understand where people are coming from and use this as a point of contact for the gospel.

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