

Title: Theological Foundation for a Reformed Doctrine of Natural Law

Author: Stephen John Grabill

Date: 2004 Degree: Ph. D., Calvin Theological Seminary

Supervisor: John Bolt

External Reader: John E. Hare

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ABSTRACT

Although the magisterial Reformers inherited the natural-law tradition as a noncontroversial legacy of late medieval scholasticism, their twentieth-century descendants have, more often than not, assumed a critical stance toward that tradition. This antipathy has been fueled—in large part, but not exclusively—by Karl Barth’s vigorous repudiation of natural theology in the 1934 disputation with Emil Brunner. Like Herman Dooyeweerd, G.C. Berkouwer, and Cornelius Van Til, Barth identified the doctrines of natural theology/natural law as rationalistic vestiges of Thomism that Calvin and Luther had unwittingly assimilated and that, in the scholastic systems of Reformed orthodoxy, became the foundation for the anthropological turn in theology that would eventually run its course in the nineteenth century.

A major obstacle for twentieth-century Protestant and Reformed theologians in assessing the significance of the natural-law tradition has been to overcome the widely misunderstood relationship between the Reformers and post-Reformation orthodoxy. Until recently, nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars tended to view Calvin as the chief codifier of Reformed doctrine and to gauge later doctrinal developments in Reformed orthodoxy as “defections” or “distortions” from the true intent of the Reformer’s theology. As a rhetorical strategy, these tendencies are reflected in Barth’s allegation that orthodoxy had fashioned Calvin “into a kind of Jean-Alphonse Turretini.”

Barth insisted that the Fall had so disordered natural human faculties that apart from Christ it is impossible to obtain genuine knowledge of God—a doctrinal assumption, which he claimed was implicit in Calvin’s teachings on the noetic “incapacity of the natural man.” A close examination of select Reformers and representatives of early and high orthodoxy, however, shows that sixteenth- and

seventeenth-century Reformed theologians maintained quite a different understanding of natural revelation from Barth.

In the theology of John Calvin, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Jerome Zanchi, Johannes Althusius, and Francis Turretin, the diminished natural human faculties still function sufficiently to reveal the general precepts of the natural moral law and to provide the anthropological starting point for a doctrine of natural law. This study develops the theological foundation for a contemporary Reformed doctrine of natural law by rehabilitating the contribution of those representatives in three interrelated areas of prolegomena—natural revelation, natural theology, and natural law.