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# The Rejection of God's Natural Moral Law: Losing the Soul of Western Civilization

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The rejection of God's natural moral law in Protestant theology in the twentieth century is, in my assessment, one crucial reason why Christians lost the battle for the soul of Western civilization. We theologians disarmed God's people on the eve of the battle with exclusive secularism, so our people did not know how to address the public square about such diverse questions as sexuality, human rights or education without giving the impression that a person or a society must first follow Jesus to know the difference between right and wrong.

In previous centuries, Christian theologians, both Catholics and Protestants, had claimed in various ways that God's moral law was present within human nature, conscience, or reason, so that all people can know the difference between right and wrong, even if that natural moral knowledge might be limited or distorted. However, this claim was denied by some of the most influential Protestant voices of the twentieth century.

The rejection of natural-law ethics and general revelation was part of a well-intended attempt to purify Protestantism from its subordination to beliefs arising from Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philoso-

phy. The people who rejected God's natural moral law were all seeking a renewed Protestant theology, ethics, and church that would be more deeply rooted in God's revelation in Christ and Scripture and no longer extensively compromised by purely secular ideas. However, the loss occasioned by this attempted intellectual repentance and self-purification was massive. In this essay we will consider the rejection of the natural moral law and its implications for public life, using the Holocaust as an example.

'Culture Protestantism' was a term used by European (mostly German-speaking) neo-orthodox theologians such as Karl Barth and Helmut Thielicke to describe the liberal European Protestant theology of the previous century. Some of the prominent writers described by this term were Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, Wilhelm Herrmann and Adolf von Harnack. All these theologians, though they held various convictions, reframed the Protestant faith as primarily pious feelings and moral values while de-emphasizing such Christian doctrines as the Trinity, the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus, or the holiness of God.

Within the German-speaking coun-

tries, Karl Barth led the way in calling for a renewed theology of the Word of God that rejected the dominance of the Enlightenment (as reflected in Culture Protestantism). However, Barth did not sufficiently appreciate the fact that Culture Protestantism was not only a rejection of key elements of standard Christian belief; it was also a rejection of God's universal moral law and always inclined towards moral relativism. Neither European neo-orthodoxy nor American fundamentalism recovered this part of the Christian heritage in response to liberal Protestantism.

Karl Barth's rejection of natural law and general revelation as acceptable themes in Protestant theology and ethics was not his theological priority, but he nevertheless had great influence in this regard. Most other Protestant thinkers who took similar positions were either followers of Barth or influenced by the climate of opinion that he shaped. After looking at Barth, we will consider two such people: Helmut Thielicke and Evan Runner.

### I. Karl Barth (1886–1968)

'Human righteousness is, as we have seen, in itself an illusion: there is in this world no observable righteousness. There may, however, be a righteousness before God, a righteousness that comes from Him.'<sup>1</sup> With such words Barth rejected the synthesis of Christianity with European culture and philosophy, a synthesis that he

viewed as dating back at least to Friedrich Schleiermacher and which, he claimed, led to the religious endorsement of nationalism and militarism, such as that seen in the initially widespread Christian support for Hitler and National Socialism.<sup>2</sup>

Barth was not so much addressing a single theological issue as questioning a pattern of relating the Christian faith to Western culture, namely Culture Protestantism.<sup>3</sup> As Barth saw it, this pattern reduced Christianity to being the religious component or dimension of the best principles of Western civilization, such that Christian beliefs were interpreted, evaluated and accepted on the basis of ideas coming from Western culture. In other words, Barth thought Western Christianity had capitulated to the Enlightenment.

Barth's comments on Schleiermacher typify this assessment. According to Schleiermacher, 'The most authentic work of Christianity is making culture the triumph of the Spirit over nature, while being a Christian is the peak of a fully cultured conscious-

2 See Robin W. Lovin, *Christian Faith and Public Choices: The Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 18–44; Arthur C. Cochrane, *The Church's Confession under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962); Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985); and Will Herberg, 'The Social Philosophy of Karl Barth', in *Community, State and Church: Three Essays by Karl Barth*, ed. Will Herberg (New York: Anchor Books, 1960).

3 On Culture Protestantism, see C. J. Curtis, *Contemporary Protestant Thought* (New York: Bruce Publishing Company, 1970), 97–103.

1 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated from the sixth edition by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1933), 75.

ness. The kingdom of God, according to Schleiermacher, is totally and completely identical with the progress of culture.' Further, for Schleiermacher, according to Barth, the 'existence of churches is really an "element that is necessary for the development of the human spirit."' <sup>4</sup>

Barth summarizes his own position in contrast to Schleiermacher when he suggests that real theologians 'should seek the secret of Christianity beyond all culture'.<sup>5</sup> Barth declares that God stands over against even the best in human culture as both Judge and Redeemer.

A crucial part of this subordination of Christianity to European culture, Barth claimed, was the doctrine of general revelation as held by natural theology, which seeks to prove the existence of God. Though Barth had been speaking out against natural theology for many years before the rise of National Socialism, Hitler's rise to power and the religious support Hitler received brought the issue to a head.

The question became a burning one at the moment when the Evangelical Church in Germany was unambiguously and consistently confronted by a definite and new form of natural theology, namely, by the demand to recognise in the political events of the year 1933, and especially in the form of the God-sent Adolf Hitler, a source of specific

new revelation of God, which, demanding obedience and trust, took its place beside the revelation attested in Holy Scripture, claiming it should be acknowledged by Christian proclamation and theology as equally binding and obligatory. ... [This would lead to] the transformation of the Christian Church into the temple of the German nature-and-history-myth.<sup>6</sup>

Barth did not want the immediate crisis of National Socialism to blind Christians to the broader problem of which the church's endorsement of Hitler was, in his opinion, merely a particular manifestation:

The same had already been the case in the developments of the preceding centuries. There can be no doubt that not merely a part but the whole had been intended and claimed when it had been demanded that side by side with its attestation in Jesus Christ and therefore in Holy Scripture the Church should also recognise and proclaim God's revelation in reason, in conscience, in the emotions, in history, in nature and in culture and its achievements and developments.<sup>7</sup>

Barth added, 'If it was admissible and right and perhaps even orthodox to combine the knowability of God in Jesus Christ with His knowability in nature, reason and history, the proc-

<sup>4</sup> Karl Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert* (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946), 388. This book contains Barth's critique of the capitulation of Christianity to the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophy.

<sup>5</sup> Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie*, 388.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: A Selection*, trans. and ed. G. W. Bromiley (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 55. The quotation is from *Church Dogmatics* II,1.

<sup>7</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 55. See the excellent treatment in Bruce Demarest, *General Revelation: Historical Views and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 115-34.

lamation of the Gospel with all kinds of other proclamations ... it is hard to see why the German Church should not be allowed to make its own particular use of the procedure.<sup>8</sup>

Barth saw the Barmen Confession (31 May 1934), of which he was the principal author, as not only a response to the particular problem of the German Christian movement that supported Hitler but also an attempt to purify the entire evangelical church of the problem of natural theology. Barmen forcefully rejects natural revelation: 'Jesus Christ, as He is attested to us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God, whom we have to hear and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We condemn the false doctrine that the Church can and must recognise as God's revelation other events and powers, forms and truth, apart from and alongside this one Word of God.'<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to all claims that God could be encountered through natural theology, natural revelation, natural law or National Socialism, Barth proclaimed that God is known only through his Word, meaning Christ. Any other approach, he declared, reduced the Christian faith to a mere religious dimension of Western culture.

Barth's approach may be illustrated by his discussion of the traditional Protestant topic of the relation between law and gospel. He thought that sinful humans were very inclined

to give the title 'law of God' to demands that did not come from God at all. That is why he changed the traditional phrase 'law and gospel' to 'gospel and law'. 'Anyone who really and earnestly would first say Law and only then, presupposing this, say Gospel would not, no matter how good his intention, be speaking of the Law of God and therefore then certainly not *his* Gospel.'<sup>10</sup>

The order 'law and gospel', used by Protestants since the Reformation, assumed a revelation of God's law through creation that has an impact on human life before people accept the gospel.<sup>11</sup> But this order, Barth thought, risked giving the title 'law of God' to demands that came from the German people, the Führer or other false sources. To avoid this error, Barth referred to 'gospel and law' to emphasize that we know for sure that a law is from God only if it follows the gospel: 'We must first of all know about the Gospel in order to know about the Law, and not vice versa.'<sup>12</sup>

Finally, Barth contended that natural-law thinking robbed people of courage when they had to confront evil: 'All arguments based on natural law are Janus-headed. They do not lead to the light of clear decisions, but to misty twilight in which all cats become grey. They lead to—Munich.'<sup>13</sup>

8 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 57.

9 This is the first article of the Barmen Confession as quoted by Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 54. As far as I know, this is the only Protestant confession that denies that God reveals himself through creation, although some other confessions do not discuss God's general revelation at length.

10 Karl Barth, 'Gospel and Law', in Herberg, *Community, State and Church*, 71.

11 See Hans O. Tiefel, *The Ethics of Gospel and Law: Aspects of the Barth-Luther Debate*, Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1967.

12 Barth, 'Gospel and Law', 72. I have responded to Barth in 'Law and Gospel: The Hermeneutical and Homiletical Key to Reformation Theology and Ethics', *Evangelical Review of Theology* 43, no. 1 (2019): 53–70.

13 Herberg, *Community, State and Church*,

Barth's bold resistance of the Nazis, as he saw it, arose from his starting point in hearing the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He thought any other basis for ethics, including natural law, led to moral compromise.

## II. Helmut Thielicke (1908–1986)

Thielicke's rejection of natural law broadly follows Barth, one of his first theology professors in the early 1930s; Thielicke also rejected both natural-law ethics and the capitulation by Western Christianity to the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment ideologies.<sup>14</sup> (Thielicke too was involved in the anti-Nazi movement among Protestant Christians in Germany during World War II.) Nevertheless, he added some considerations that merit separate discussion.

Whereas traditionally Protestants associated the Ten Commandments with the natural law, Thielicke associated them with 'natural lawlessness'.<sup>15</sup>

Noting the negative 'Thou shalt not' structure of many commandments, he claimed, 'There is within this negativity a protest against man as he actually is'.<sup>16</sup> This approach was in opposition, he contended, to natural-law conceptions, which 'can be assumed only on the presupposition that the fall has only a comparatively accidental but not an essential significance'.<sup>17</sup> 'Natural law and the Decalogue in fact belong to completely different worlds'.<sup>18</sup> For Thielicke, the Ten Commandments harshly confront and condemn our natural lawlessness.

This observation relates to Thielicke's critique of Culture Protestantism. Whereas 'The Decalogue is expressly set down within the context of a dialogue'<sup>19</sup> (meaning a dialogue with God in personal faith), natural law and Culture Protestantism conceive of moral decisions as being made by solitary egos, seeing God as the distant author of moral laws:

Culture Protestantism makes Christianity into a form of the world (*Weltgestalt*) in the sense that the commands of God—in-

49. In the Munich Agreement of 1938, France and Britain permitted the Nazi takeover of the Czech Sudetenland. This agreement became a watchword for the futility of appeasing totalitarianism.

14 Thielicke's critique of the capitulation of Christianity to the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thought is found in *The Evangelical Faith* (hereafter *EF*), vol. 1: *Prolegomena: The Relation of Theology to Modern Thought Forms*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), and in *Modern Faith and Thought*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

15 Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics* (hereafter *TE*), vol. 1: *Foundations*, trans. and ed. William H. Lazareth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, rpt. 1984), 444. The material about Thielicke is broadly dependent on my Ph.D.

dissertation, *Helmut Thielicke's Ethics of Law and Gospel* (University of Iowa, 1987). Representing the traditional Protestant view, John Calvin claimed that natural law, 'which we have above described as written, even engraved, upon the hearts of all, in a sense asserts the very same things that are to be learned from the two Tables'. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II.vii.1. This connection of God's natural law with the Ten Commandments is present in most of the Reformers.

16 Thielicke, *TE*, 1:441.

17 Thielicke, *TE*, 1:443.

18 Thielicke, *TE*, 1:444.

19 Thielicke, *TE*, 1:442.

cluding the command to love one's neighbour—are detached from the divine *auctor legis* and from the relationship of decision and faith with this author. One could also say that Culture Protestantism tends to separate the second table of the law from the first Commandment ('I am the Lord your God; you shall have no other gods besides me') and then represents the individual commandments as maxims of Christian behaviour.<sup>20</sup>

Thielicke thought that as soon as the commands of God are separated from their source, they undergo a change of meaning that leaves them significantly different from what they were intended to be. Specifically, biblical moral prescriptions fall prey to ideological perversion once they are separated from God. For example, he thought the maxim 'the interests of the group come before the interests of the individual' could be a legitimate application of the biblical love command. But it was also used by the Nazis in their terrible ideology.

Thielicke similarly saw in the early works of Karl Marx a secularized expression of Christian love, but once this love command was separated from its source and integrated into the system of historical materialism, its meaning was substantially changed.<sup>21</sup> A moral theory that allows the independence of a moral command from God risks serious ideological per-

version. 'Only the one who stands in personal contact with the Lord of the First Commandment, as one who has been called and who follows, recognizes that the commands of God are something "wholly other."'<sup>22</sup>

Thielicke took a correspondingly new, anti-natural law direction in interpreting the Sermon on the Mount:

The harsh and apparently alien aspect of the Sermon on the Mount is its true point. It makes its demands with no regard for constitutional factors such as the impulses or for the limitations imposed on my personal will by autonomous structures. ... It does not claim me merely in a sphere of personal freedom. It thus compels me to identify myself with my total I. Hence I have to see in the world, not merely the creation of God, but also the structural form of human sin, i.e., its suprapersonal form, the 'fallen' world. ... I have to confess that I myself have fallen, and that what I see out there is the structural objectification of my fall.<sup>23</sup>

Whereas Culture Protestants, natural-law theorists, and 'German Christians' generally saw societal structures as the result of creation, perhaps calling them 'creation orders', Thielicke saw them as resulting from the Fall.<sup>24</sup> Other views, he

<sup>22</sup> Thielicke, *Kirche*, 45, 46.

<sup>23</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *EF*, vol. 2: *The Doctrine of God and of Christ*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 248.

<sup>24</sup> In Europe during the mid-twentieth century, the term 'German Christians' referred to the Christians who actively, sometimes vehemently, supported Hitler's policies. In German they were called '*die Deutsche Christen*'

<sup>20</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Kirche und Öffentlichkeit: Zur Grundlegung einer lutherischen Kulturethik* (Tubingen: Furche Verlag, 1947), 44.

<sup>21</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Vernunft und Existenz bei Lessing: Das Unbedingte in der Geschichte* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), 49.

claimed, resulted from minimizing the total demand of God encountered in the Sermon on the Mount and left people without a complete sense of responsibility for all their actions.

Thielicke's discussion of the problem of 'autonomous norms' recalls Barth's concern for granting moral authority as the 'law of God' to a norm that does not deserve such a noble classification:

Since Kant the fact is known and deeply rooted in our thinking that the individual spheres of life are endowed with their autonomous norms. He imputed this autonomous structure principally to the spheres of meaning of the ethical, the esthetical and the theoretical. More recently one has learned to reckon with the autonomy of all the historical spheres of life; one knows of the autonomy of the state, of economic life, of law and of politics. One grants each of these historical spheres an autonomous structure because it is endowed with a constituting principle, from which all its proper functions can be derived.<sup>25</sup>

Because people think there are 'immanent principles which so control the processes involved as to make them proceed automatically',<sup>26</sup> people say business is business, art is art, politics is politics. Even responsible people talk and act as if each sphere of life and society has its own natural laws that carry validity and authority

regardless of any moral principles or ethical rules coming from an outside source, whether that source is God, the Bible or the church. Thielicke denies the validity of these autonomous norms, viewing them as an expression of our fallenness. They are structural expressions of sin, not creation orders in which we encounter a God-given natural moral law. And if one of these immanent principles is absolutized or idolized, secular ideologies such as National Socialism or Communism result.<sup>27</sup>

Thielicke claimed that all natural-law theories of ethics made two crucial assumptions: (1) there exists a perceptible order of existence that can be traced back to creation; (2) human reason is largely untouched by sin, so all people can perceive this moral order.<sup>28</sup> Thielicke rejected both assumptions, arguing that human reason cannot discern the good without revelation because it is too distorted by sin to engage in reliable ethical evaluation.<sup>29</sup>

Thielicke called for a purification of Protestant ethics from notions of natural law, similar to the Reformation's purification of Protestant theology from conceptions of salvation by works. 'Man's incapacity to justify

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*Bewegung*' or simply 'Deutsche Christen'.

<sup>25</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Geschichte und Existenz: Grundlegung einer evangelischen Gesellschaftstheologie* (Gütersloh: Verlag C. Bertelsmann, 1935), 46.

<sup>26</sup> Thielicke, *TE*, 2:71.

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<sup>27</sup> Thielicke, *TE*, 2:72. A similar discussion of the topic of autonomous norms appears in Danish thinker N. H. Soe, *Christliche Ethik* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1957). The similarity of the discussions by two thinkers influenced by Barth suggests that this assessment of societal structures flows from the basic lines of Barth's theology.

<sup>28</sup> *TE*, 1:388.

<sup>29</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Theologische Ethik*, vol. 2 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1955), 371–83. His 'Theological Critique of Reason' does not appear in the English edition.



himself by good works is logically to be augmented by, or integrated with, a similar incapacity truly to know the will and commandment of God.<sup>30</sup> For him, all Protestant ethics should be only an ethics of justification by faith alone, with no place for any notion of natural law.

### III. H. Evan Runner (1916–2002)

H. Evan Runner was a North American follower of the 'Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea', crafted by the Dutch Protestant thinker Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977). This movement was not directly influenced by Barth or Thielicke, but it had important similarities. Dooyeweerd and his followers were sharply critical of the medieval synthesis of the biblical and classical traditions, arguing that it furthered the secularization of Europe and North America. They also rejected any synthesis of Christian beliefs with Enlightenment or post-Enlightenment philosophy, suspecting that it had contributed to the two world wars.

In an unpublished 1957 speech, 'The Development of Calvinism in North America on the Background of Its Development in Europe', Runner argued that Christians should completely reject natural-law theory. Runner traced this theory to the deist philosophy of Lord Herbert of Cherbury

(1583–1648), especially his book *De Veritate* (1624). As the Thirty Years' War was devastating Europe, Herbert advocated a 'universal' religion and law that could overcome the conflicts between people. Obviously, this proposal deprived Christianity of its distinctiveness.

A year later came Hugo Grotius's *De Jure Belli et Pacis* (1625). According to Runner, Grotius sharply distinguished the law of God from the law of nature. Although Grotius believed in the law of God, he thought the foundation of public life should be the law of nature. These ideas were developed a generation later by Samuel Pufendorf, who also sharply distinguished between divine revelation and natural law. Thus, Runner argued, a whole new outlook developed that was contrary to the Reformation faith. Man was no longer seen as a covenantal being whose meaning is found in relation to God, but as a rational-moral being who has within himself a proper guide to life and the ability to act according to this guide. As Runner stated, 'Such men did not hesitate to leave Revelation and the Kingdom of Christ to the private lives of those who showed some concern for these matters', yet they 'took up with unfailing confidence the building of the Kingdom of Man on Earth. Communism is one form of the general pattern.'

In this way, Runner saw the medieval dualistic scheme of nature and grace seeping back into Protestant lands, with disastrous results. The medieval synthesis, he believed, was really an attempt to hold on to pagan philosophy in the realm of nature while adding Christian beliefs in the restricted realm of grace or 'supernature'. Runner criticized the Reformers

<sup>30</sup> TE, 1:326. What Thielicke says here can be seen as a development of related themes in Barth. See Barth, 'No!' in *Natural Theology: Comprising 'Nature and Grace' by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply 'No!' by Dr. Karl Barth*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946), 97.

for not more completely replacing the medieval nature-grace framework with a more authentic evangelical philosophy. In his reading, the theology of Luther's colleague at the University of Wittenberg, Phillip Melancthon (1497–1560), already showed signs of capitulation to the medieval framework, which made revelation and the Christian faith irrelevant to such areas of life as law, politics and business, thereby contributing to the secularization of Western culture. Natural-law theories, whether Protestant or Catholic, were an important part of nature-grace dualism for Runner and should therefore be rejected.<sup>31</sup>

#### IV. Assessment

We have seen three related reasons for rejecting general revelation and natural law within Protestantism. For Barth, natural law is part of the natural theology that reduced the Christian faith to the religious dimension of Western culture and lost sight of the otherness of God, leaving Christianity hopelessly compromised in relation to Western civilization (especially represented by National Socialism) and unequipped to stand against society in prophetic criticism. Thielicke developed this argument, claiming that human reason is so heavily shaped by sin that it cannot derive any reliable moral norms from the structure of human life. Along a different line, Runner rejected natural law as part of the nature-grace dualism that contributed to the destructive

secularization of Western civilization.

Barth, Thielicke and Runner should all be appreciated for advancing a purification of Western Christianity that was deeply rooted in God's revelation in Christ and scripture. But the weakness of this line of thought becomes apparent when one asks, 'Could the soldiers of Hitler's Third Reich have known that it was morally wrong to march trainloads of Jews and others into the concentration camps?' The soldiers had orders from the German High Command, and the Nazi-led government had rewritten German laws to make those orders legal. Therefore, the soldiers were following the rule of law. Did those soldiers have a basis on which to say, 'This is wrong!' and to refuse to obey orders?

According to the Barth-Thielicke-Runner line of argument, there is no clear answer. If the soldiers recognized the authority of Jesus or the Bible, then they should have perceived the wrongness of their actions; but if they did not, based on these theories, then neither their rationality nor their conscience had access to a higher moral law on the basis of which they should disobey orders. Though Barth and Thielicke risked their lives to speak and write brilliantly against the Nazis, their philosophy would have left them unable to tell non-Christian soldiers, 'You know this is wrong'.

This theological weakness cost Western civilization its soul. The Protestant churches were left saying to their neighbors, more or less, 'We know it is wrong to participate in genocide, but we are not sure if you can know that it is wrong to participate in genocide.' Rather than saying something clear and constructive about how everyone, regardless of their faith identity, can know something

<sup>31</sup> Other philosophers influenced by Dooyeweerd reconfigured natural-law theory instead of rejecting it. See Thomas K. Johnson, *Natural Law Ethics* (Bonn: VKW, 2005), 116–24.

about right and wrong, Protestants applied ethics only to Christians.

Elsewhere I have assessed how this theological situation pushed Christians in two opposite directions: either an ethics of holiness that applied biblical principles within the Christian communities, or an ethics of domination that attempted to reassert the claims of Christian ethics on secular society, whether as a call for a 'Christian America' or a 'Christian Europe'.<sup>32</sup> Both of these directions largely communicated the same message to our neighbours of other faiths or no faith: 'We are not sure if you can know it is wrong to practice genocide unless you first start to follow Jesus.' By the mistaken character of what they communicated about ethics, Protestant churches accidentally promoted exclusive secularism and moral nihilism, thereby cutting the heart out of the West.

The primary solution is not a new claim about the power of human reason to prove right and wrong (or the existence of God), though the proper use of rationality is a gift of God that should be developed with discipline. The primary solution is to see that in the Bible, God is described as constantly revealing his moral law to all humanity as part of his general revelation (which is distinct from the special revelation of the gospel). Because of what God is constantly doing, people generally know that genocide is wrong, even if they are committing it. We can say the same about other terrible evils, even if we cannot yet fully explain how God reveals his natural moral law or how people learn about right and wrong.<sup>33</sup>

Such a theological change could revolutionize what our churches communicate about ethics to the world around us. We could ask a soldier participating in genocide, 'How might you find the courage to do what you know is right, even if it costs your life?' Christian communications about ethics must assume that people, regardless of their faith, already know something about right and wrong; we can then discuss how they know this and what this knowledge implies about God and human nature. Of course, one must also be prepared to apply the gospel of forgiveness.

Karl Barth and Helmut Thielicke were right to reject Culture Protestantism and the subordination of Christianity to secular thought. Evan Runner was right to reject some Enlightenment views regarding natural law. But rather than removing God's general revelation and natural moral law from our theology and ethics, we need to reconfigure them. For they represent what God is doing, not what humanity is doing. The Creator is active in his creation, even if all of unbelieving life, thought and culture is involved in suppressing the unavoidable knowledge of God and his moral law. But even suppressed knowledge, if it comes from God, is still effective knowledge. Once we recognize this, we will be better equipped to talk about serious matters with our unbelieving neighbours and introduce the gospel of Christ as revealed in Scripture. Perhaps in this way God might restore the soul of Western civilization.

32 Johnson, *Natural Law Ethics*, 7–14.

33 For more see Thomas K. Johnson, *The*

*First Step in Missions Training: How Our Neighbors Are Wrestling with God's General Revelation* (Bonn: WEA, 2014).