Divine Covenants and Moral Order

A Biblical Theology of Natural Law

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Preface

This book represents the continuation of a larger project, the first major part of which was also published in the Emory University Studies in Law and Religion.¹ In that volume I explored the place of natural law in Reformed theology from the sixteenth century to the present, especially in its relation to the doctrine of the two kingdoms. I concluded that the ideas of natural law and the two kingdoms played an important role in Reformed social thought through the nineteenth century, and I reflected on why much of twentieth-century Reformed theology largely ignored these ideas, or even came to regard them as foreign to the spirit of Reformed Christianity.

Though this prior volume was historical in focus, I did suggest that contemporary Reformed Christians ought to reconsider the doctrines of natural law and the two kingdoms. Reformed theologians of yesteryear utilized these categories in theological and social contexts very different from our own, but I expressed my conviction that they are rooted in Scripture and remain exceedingly relevant for helping Christians think clearly about living godly lives in early-twenty-first-century Western society. I also noted my own hope “to offer a detailed biblical, theological, and ethical defense of the Reformed natural law and two kingdoms doctrines, revised in certain respects and applied to important concrete social issues” (14). The present volume seeks to fulfill part of that goal by presenting a thorough (though of course not comprehensive) study of natural law in Scripture while addressing many crucial questions of theology and ethics along the way.² I now hope to extend this project to a third volume,

¹. David VanDrunen, Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).
². I have also fulfilled part of that goal in a separate work, intended primarily for a
in which I plan to build on the conclusions developed here and to explore their relevance for some perennial issues of legal and political theory, including justice, authority, religious freedom, and economic organization. Many of the paths that book is likely to take are anticipated in the present work.

If my goal in writing this had been to win as much agreement and as few critics as possible, I undoubtedly should have written a different — and shorter — book. It would have been relatively easy and uncontroversial to argue that some concept of natural law is at work in Scripture and deserves recognition in Christian theology and ethics. But I judged that writing a thin study of natural law in Scripture would not be nearly as helpful or fun as constructing a thick account that probes the theological foundations undergirding the many biblical texts that reflect the reality of a natural moral order. Accordingly, in the chapters that follow I engage in an ambitious, cross-disciplinary endeavor that stretches the bounds of my own scholarly expertise, to be sure. But natural law is hardly the tame kind of subject likely to remain content within the narrow confines of most modern scholarship. Any theory of natural law likely to do any semblance of justice to the topic will have to cross several disciplines, so I can only hope that a place remains for such an inquiry in contemporary academia.

In producing this book I owe a considerable debt of gratitude to the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University, and especially to John Witte and Amy Wheeler. I am so thankful for the hospitable, stimulating, and peaceful environment that the Center provided for me while I enjoyed a study leave several years ago, during which time I officially began the research and writing that turned into this book. Prof. Witte also had the brilliant idea of putting together a “virtual symposium” on a draft of the book and then ensured that it came to pass. Submitting my work to a group of distinguished scholars from a variety of academic fields was intimidating, but I know without a doubt that the final product is considerably better than it would have been without this experience. Thus I offer many thanks to John, Amy, and their colleagues at the Center for such generous encouragement along the way and for giving me the honor of contributing again to their admirable Studies in Law and Religion. Thank you also to Eerdmans for their fruitful collaboration with the folks at Emory in promoting this series, and for bringing this volume to the light of day.

Gratitude is thus also due to those willing to participate in the virtual

popular audience, in which I presented a biblical and theological case for a version of the two kingdoms doctrine; see Living in God’s Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).
symposium from far and near: William Brown, Jonathan Burnside, Andrew Das, Paul Helm, Russell Hittinger, David Novak, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. The challenges, prodding, suggestions, and encouragement were much appreciated and spurred many fruitful revisions to my work, from tiny details to systemic considerations. Thanks to you all for taking the time to read and comment on a long manuscript still far from being a finished product.

My home institution, Westminster Seminary California, remains a wonderfully supportive community for theological reflection and ministerial training. I am grateful to the board, faculty, students, and staff for their various contributions to the collegiality on such regular display around campus. I thank the board and faculty for granting me two study leaves — one coinciding with the very beginning of this project and one with its very end — that provided extended times of intensive research and writing so conducive for bringing a project like this together. Sincere thanks to faculty colleagues who provided comments on various parts of this manuscript at various stages of development: Steve Baugh, Dennis Johnson, Charles Telfer, Josh Van Ee, and especially Bryan Estelle, John Fesko, and Mike Horton. But I hate to name only a few in the seminary community. On countless occasions over the years — in the classroom, at the Warfield Seminar, or on other informal occasions — this community has provided spiritual nourishment and intellectual stimulation for which I should be even more grateful than I am.

And before I move on from the seminary, a special word of thanks to Anna Speckhard Smith for cheerful, timely, and insightful research assistance, and for her unenviable labor of putting together the bibliography by the date I requested. May your hard-won expertise in goring oxen bring you wealth and renown.

Many other people provided me with helpful insights on a variety of occasions, either on drafts of chapters, on basic research questions, or on particular intellectual issues perplexing to me. I fear I am forgetting some of them, but let me at least mention Eric Enlow, Greg Forster, D. J. Goodwiler, Brian Hecker, Tom Johnson, Shane Lems, Robert Lotzer, David Noe, Scott Pryor, Manfred Svensson, Matt Tuininga, and Jens Zimmerman. I’m grateful to you all for your time and wisdom. Thank you too to my family’s pastor, Zach Keele — for many things, but here especially for all those keen exegetical insights delivered from the pulpit on the Lord’s Day that found their way into my research notes first thing on Monday morning, some of which you may recognize in the pages that follow, even when unacknowledged.

Abundant thanks, as always, to Katherine and Jack, wife and son par excellence and the best imaginable companions in a happy home.
Introduction

Alister McGrath has observed: “The idea that human morality might ultimately be grounded in something built into the fabric of the universe itself has obstinately refused to die out. It possesses a certain intuitive plausibility, even if its conceptual clarification has proved to be immensely difficult.”¹ McGrath is surely correct on each count. In the present day, when the world is so morally fragmented, the idea of a natural and universally binding moral law perhaps seems more implausible than it ever has. Yet in such a world, which also speaks so earnestly of human rights and seeks some way to ensure social peace in the midst of moral fragmentation, the search for a natural law that transcends particular cultural boundaries is as relevant as ever.

Even so, another new book on natural law demands a defense. The present volume draws from the reservoirs of Western Christian reflection on natural law, yet offers a constructive theory of natural law that is distinctive in certain respects, in terms of its approach to the subject and its substantive conclusions. I develop this theory seeking to recover four centuries of Reformed theological conviction about natural law that has been curiously neglected for much of the past century. This attempted recovery of Reformed natural law thought, furthermore, taps into important streams of natural law theory before the Reformation, especially in the realist tradition. Yet I pursue this task in a historically unusual way, through a biblical-theological approach that draws upon important Reformed theological themes, especially the doctrine of the biblical covenants. I exegete numerous texts from all over Scripture in close interaction with contemporary biblical scholarship, and I seek to integrate my

conclusions from these texts into a larger theological framework that explains the character and role of natural law in the unfolding drama of God’s dealings with this world from creation to consummation.

I defend the writing of this book not only on the basis of its uniqueness in the annals of Christian natural law theory but also on account of its timing. Much of the recent literature on natural law has moved in directions that anticipate and even invite a book such as this. Three developments in particular come to mind. First, many writers have repudiated the kind of natural law theory, often associated (imprecisely) with the Enlightenment, that masquerades as the product of autonomous human reason, unconstrained by any authority outside itself. Second, many authors have called for a reintegration of natural law theory with biblical ethics and its traditional theological moorings. Third, a number of Protestant scholars have argued that natural law has played an important role historically in the theological and moral traditions stemming from the Reformation. Some of them have even attempted to construct and defend theories of natural law, despite skepticism about natural law in many Protestant circles during the past century and continuing to the present.

These developments are encouraging. Christians indeed ought to reject natural law theories rooted in illusions of autonomous human reason freed from the restraints of external authority. Furthermore, integrating theories of natural law more thoroughly with the biblical narrative and with broader theological doctrine should only help to strengthen such theories and make them more plausible to thoughtful Christians. At the same time, these encouraging developments have not as yet fulfilled their promise. Recent authors have done relatively little actual exegesis of Scripture in the service of natural law theory, and most recent Protestant attempts to forge constructive theories of natural law give scant attention to what Reformation theology might contribute to this endeavor.

In the context of this recent literature, which is encouraging but has not yet delivered on its promise, this book offers a Reformed biblical theology of natural law. It is genuinely an account of natural law, in organic continuity with broader Christian natural law traditions, including the famous medieval formulation of Thomas Aquinas. Yet it is also a Reformed biblical theology\(^2\)

\(^2\) I would like the term “biblical theology,” as used here and in the book’s title, to remain somewhat vague. In one sense I use the term simply to highlight that I engage in the study of theology through the exegesis of biblical texts. I do not mean to use the term in a technical sense to indicate that I pursue the discipline of “biblical theology” as distinguished from, say, exegetical theology, systematic theology, or moral theology. To some degree, however, I do pursue the discipline of biblical theology in the more technical sense, since I let the
of natural law, since I believe, in the spirit of the Reformation, that Christian doctrine and ethics must be reformed according to the word of God. Thus I develop this account primarily through the exegesis of Scripture, as hermeneutically guided by classic Reformed covenant theology. By grounding natural law in God’s covenants with all creation, this theology of natural law rejects the idea of human autonomy but instead interprets natural law in terms of humanity’s relationship to God and accountability before him. By presenting natural law in connection with the series of covenants (plural) revealed through biblical history, rather than as an ahistorical reality, this account seeks to place natural law in the context of the whole story of Scripture, identifying both its universal relevance for the human race and its relation to God’s particular work of redemption as it culminates in the first and second comings of Jesus Christ. By presenting natural law in connection with these biblical covenants, furthermore, this account utilizes a theological theme distinctively important in the Reformed tradition, and thus this account constitutes not simply a defense of natural law by a Protestant, but a Protestant exposition of natural law. Through this biblical theology of natural law I hope both to provide all readers with a stimulating case that will advance broader discussions of this topic and to convince my fellow Reformed Christians of the importance of natural law for Christian faith and life.

Why should Christians, even Protestant Christians, deem natural law an important issue? Perhaps chiefly, they should do so because Scripture itself teaches that all human beings, made in God’s image and situated within a broader created order, know their basic moral obligations before God and their accountability to him as their ruler and judge. And because these obligations are universal, Scripture also presents them as foundational for Christians’ understanding of their moral responsibilities, both as citizens of broader civil societies and as members of the church of Jesus Christ. Some readers will redemptive-historical unfolding of the divine covenants in Scripture determine the structure of much of the book. In the end I engage in elements of exegetical, biblical, systematic, and moral theology, and despite the tendency of the modern academy to keep these disciplines separate, I cannot really imagine doing good theology — at least in the present volume — without engaging them all.

3. J. Budziszewski (speaking as a Roman Catholic) has recently remarked that what is needed is an evangelical explanation of natural law theory, not an evangelical theory of natural law. See his closing essay in Natural Law and Evangelical Political Theory, ed. Jesse Covington, Bryan McGraw, and Micah Watson (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2012). If one substitutes “Reformed” for “evangelical” for greater precision, I believe I am attempting the latter and not simply the former.
likely agree with these claims and yet, wearied by the interminable debates about natural law and skeptical of many versions of natural law theory, prefer to examine such issues under some rubric other than “natural law.” These readers may still find much to appreciate in this book, even while objecting to the natural law terminology, but I deal with these issues in terms of “natural law” both because I do not find the term objectionable per se (our universal human moral obligations are both “natural” and “law”) and because Western Christian theology (including Reformed theology) has for so long used this term as it has wrestled with these issues.

In the remainder of this introduction I first place my project in contemporary context through interaction with a number of recent natural law theorists and then summarize my argument and how I develop it in subsequent chapters. Finally, I set my project in historical context, with particular attention to the Thomistic tradition.

**Natural Law in Recent Constructive Proposals**

In recent years a number of scholars have produced major works on natural law, and their labors form an important part of the context of my present project. Among notable examples are books by Roman Catholics Robert George, Russell Hittinger, Jean Porter, and Matthew Levering, and by Protestants Craig Boyd, J. Daryl Charles, and Alister McGrath.\(^4\) Jewish scholar David Novak also wrestles with many of the same issues in his work, and I interact with his claims at several points in subsequent chapters.\(^5\) With the exception of George — who attempts to ground his natural law theory in practical reason alone, without recourse to a philosophy of nature, and defends his theory’s legitimacy independent of God’s existence — the writers mentioned above generally seek to distinguish natural law theory from the pretensions of autonomous human

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reason and support the reintegration of natural law theory with biblical studies and broader theological doctrine. Appendix 1 provides a summary of the work of each of these eight authors.

As expressed at the outset, I find many positive and encouraging aspects in most of these contemporary natural law proposals. I heartily resonate with their rejection of conceptions of autonomous human reason, their interest in grounding natural law in a rich theology and anthropology, and their support of reintegrating natural law theory with biblical ethics. Nevertheless, in my judgment the recent literature only scratches the surface of Scripture’s teaching on natural law and has not connected natural law with the full range of Christian doctrine as it might.

First, the recent literature often acknowledges the need to connect natural law to Scriptural teaching, but provides little detailed biblical exegesis or attention to the broader biblical story of God’s dealings with creation generally and the human race specifically. Though relatively few in number, several insightful biblical scholars have recently presented studies on natural law-related themes in Scripture. Yet such studies have played a minimal role in shaping the natural law theories of the writers mentioned at the opening of this section. These writers identify Scripture as an important source for understanding natural law, but engage biblical scholarship sparsely, if at all. Levering is an exception to these observations. He interacts with biblical scholars such as John Barton and Markus Bockmuehl, who have wrestled with natural law as a Scriptural theme, and he attends to several relevant passages in Scripture itself. Nevertheless, even Levering presents little rigorous biblical exegesis and considers only a small part of the biblical corpus. Another exception is Novak, who has insightfully identified natural law at work in many places in the Hebrew Bible. But for a Christian natural law theorist, who also recognizes the New Testament as Scripture and who reads the Hebrew Bible as the Old Testament that anticipates the New, Novak’s work has inevitable limitations.

Second, in addition to its paucity of rigorous biblical exegesis, the recent


7. Levering interacts with Barton and Bockmuehl in Biblical Natural Law, chap. 1.
natural law literature also lacks a well-defined sense of how exactly natural law relates to the larger biblical narrative. This narrative begins with creation, proceeds through a fall into sin, continues through a series of divine dealings with humanity in salvation and judgment, climaxes with the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, and will be consummated by Christ’s second coming and the establishment of a new heavens and new earth. Even when the contemporary literature properly identifies biblical texts that pertain to natural law, it too often exhibits what Francis Watson calls the “tendency to interpret scriptural texts relating to creation in isolation from their canonical contexts.”

Though Christianity is a historical religion, grounded in temporal divine acts of judgment and salvation, many Christian writers have conceived of natural law as an ahistorical ontological reality that communicates timeless moral truth. It is not obvious how one might weave natural law into the fabric of the historical biblical narrative.

A few examples illustrate these observations. Boyd, through his quest to develop a “narrative” defense of natural law, admirably seeks to get away from the tendency to treat natural law as an abstract and ahistorical ontological reality. Yet the narratives he tells are the story of the evolutionary development of human nature and the history of interpretation of natural law. Whatever the relevance of such narratives, a crucial narrative missing is the biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. A similar observation applies to Porter’s theory, given its focus on evolutionary biology and the medieval scholastic natural law tradition but lack of attention to the biblical narrative. In the theories of both Boyd and Porter the supernatural perfecting of the natural is an important theme, but they do not explain how this theme is to be understood in the context of the objective divine acts of redemptive history. Levering, who also emphasizes the supernatural perfecting of the natural, does have interest in the progress of biblical history from old covenant to new covenant, especially as described by the Apostle Paul. In light of my argument in this volume, Levering addresses many of the right issues, but does not adequately capture the profound implications of Pauline soteriology and eschatology for a Christian theology of natural law.

Charles and McGrath also do not situate natural law within the larger biblical story. A recurring tension in Charles’s work is illustrative. In a number of places Charles promotes natural law as a means to facilitate Christians’

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coeexistence in this world with unbelievers. Natural law, he explains, provides a way to engage in genuinely moral conversations in a pluralistic world and thus to avoid the contemporary tendency toward relativism. Yet in many of the very contexts in which he makes such claims he speaks of natural law as a tool for the redemptive transformation of society. One could raise a conceptual objection that the quest to coexist peacefully and the quest to transform redemptively seem to be distinct endeavors. But the deeper issue is that the story of God’s providential preservation of the present world and the redemptive story of incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and consummation are interrelated but should not be conflated. Where precisely does natural law fit in the development and interconnection of these two biblical stories? The fact that Charles does not wrestle with this question bears fruit in the one instance in which he engages in an extended analysis of a particular passage of Scripture, Paul’s address on Mars Hill in Acts 17. Charles never clarifies how and why the strategies of this sermon, which is clearly evangelistic and aimed at the religious conversion of Paul’s audience, are applicable in the context of civil coexistence in a religiously pluralistic society, as Charles suggests.

Though McGrath’s project has a very different tenor from Charles’s, it raises questions that are not entirely different. McGrath deals with natural law as an aspect of a broader natural theology that, when seen properly, discloses the kingdom of God and the redemption of the present creation by virtue of Christ’s incarnation. McGrath’s interest in the relationship among natural theology, natural law, and the Christian doctrine of salvation is in some ways a welcome development, since many historic theories of nature hardly bothered to address the issue at all. But can nature’s disclosure of God and his law be understood entirely within a soteriological framework, as either the disclosure of God’s kingdom through the incarnation (for those who see properly) or the veiling of the same (for those who see poorly)? As I argue below, Scripture also speaks of a natural disclosure of God and his law in the work of creation and providence, distinct from the work of redemption, a disclosure that serves as the presupposition and foundation of the divine revelation of salvation in Christ. With respect at least to these concerns, McGrath does not situate natural law in the context of the entire story of the biblical narrative.

A third issue is that contemporary natural law theorists do not place

10. For the coexistence theme, see e.g. Charles, Retrieving the Natural Law, pp. 23-24, 154; for the redemptive transformation theme, see e.g. Retrieving the Natural Law, pp. 23, 24-25 n. 57, 315.

11. See Charles, Retrieving the Natural Law, pp. 45-54.
natural law in the context of the broad system of Christian doctrine as fully as they might. This is connected to the previous point, for exploring the relation of natural law to the biblical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation entails exploring the relation of natural law to fundamental *loci* of systematic theology such as anthropology, hamartiology, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. This is a crucial issue, in my judgment. Many Christians — particularly Protestants — will continue to be suspicious of natural law if it cannot be set compellingly in the context of a broader biblical and systematic theology. As James Barr has noted, in his wide-ranging study of natural theology in Scripture, “What is required is not just a few words, or the exegesis of a few words, but a wide vision and perspective within which the status of the question might be seen. Exegesis alone will not alter people’s minds, until they perceive an alternative total perspective through which they can see not only the biblical material but also an explanation of how it affects a wide range of personal stands and theological problems.”

Of particular interest here is the absence of a distinctly and historically Protestant theology of natural law in the contemporary literature. Neither Boyd nor Charles develops a systematic theological foundation for natural law. Instead, the theology of Aquinas is their touchstone. Whether in Boyd’s evaluation of divine-command ethics or in Charles’s appeals to fellow evangelicals, the burden of both writers vis-à-vis Protestant theology seems to be negative rather than positive. That is, they do not show how a rich (and distinctive) theology of natural law can be built on a Protestant theological foundation, but simply try to demonstrate that Protestant theology is not opposed to a doctrine of natural law.

There are many good reasons for Protestants to regard Thomas Aquinas as an illustrious theologian of the Western Christian church and to identify many aspects of continuity between his theology of natural law and that of the Protestant Reformers, an issue I revisit at length below. Nevertheless, the Reformation engaged Western Christianity on a number of doctrines crucial to a theological understanding of natural law, including but not limited to the image of God, the effects of the fall on human reason and volition, the relationship of nature and grace, and the relationship of law and faith. For those who embrace the Reformation generally — and, as in my own case, the Reformed

13. For a helpful, though brief, study that does seek to move in the positive direction, see Thomas K. Johnson, *Natural Law Ethics: An Evangelical Proposal* (Bonn: Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2005), especially pp. 131-34.
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theological tradition particularly — appeal to Thomas cannot be sufficient. Natural law is intimately connected to conceptions of the image of God, the powers of human reason, and a person’s standing before the law of God, among many other things, and thus the reformation of these latter doctrines demands the reformation of the theology of natural law as well. Protestants and Roman Catholics after the Reformation continued to share many convictions about basic moral problems, but Charles’s assertion that the Reformers had theological disputes with the Roman church but “maintained full continuity with their Catholic counterparts” with regard to ethics is not accurate. As with many other aspects of Christian doctrine, the very idea of a reformed Christianity indicates that a Protestant understanding of natural law should exhibit both continuity and discontinuity with the pre-Reformation theological traditions.

McGrath’s claim that the testimony of nature reveals the redemptive work of the kingdom of God may appear rigorously and distinctively Protestant in its sharp rebuke of human reason’s ability to read God in nature by its own autonomous power. But his claim that nature speaks about the last things rather than the first things — that it speaks about the things of the age to come rather than the things of this age — makes the eschatological swallow the protological. This marks a significant break from the whole Western tradition — Roman Catholic and Protestant — of thinking about natural law and matters germane. Conflating the natural and the supernatural falls short of providing a historically Protestant theological foundation for natural law, just as remaining content with a Thomistic view of nature and grace also does.

In my judgment what is still lacking, then, is a theological-ethical exploration of natural law that is grounded in the thorough exegesis of Scripture, set in the context of the larger biblical story of creation, fall, preservation, redemption, and consummation, and developed upon a distinctively Protestant theological foundation. I present this study as an attempt to provide just this, noting that my theological foundation is not simply “distinctively Protestant” but more specifically Reformed. As Novak has constructed a theological account of natural law “constituted from within the sources of the Jewish tradition,” so I aim to construct a theological account of natural law from the resources already present within the Reformed tradition.

14. See Charles, Retrieving the Natural Law, p. 125. I think for example of the way that the Reformation’s doctrine of justification triggered a rethinking of the important moral issue of Christian liberty, as expressed for example in Martin Luther’s essay “The Freedom of the Christian”; John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 3:19; and the Westminster Confession of Faith, chap. 20.

15. Novak, Natural Law in Judaism, p. 11.
The Argument, Assumptions, and Structure of This Book

Two resources in the Reformed tradition especially important for this volume are its longstanding affirmation of the reality of natural law and its utilization of the biblical covenants as an organizing principle of theology. In this section I reflect briefly first upon the place of natural law in the Reformed tradition and then upon the character of Reformed covenant theology. The early Reformed tradition offers some important and suggestive hints as to the relationship of natural law and the biblical covenants, but this relationship was, I believe, an underdeveloped theme.  

As I have argued at length in a recent work, natural law was a standard feature of Reformed theology from the Reformation to the early twentieth century, though in the past century it largely fell out of favor among Reformed theologians, either by neglect or outright opposition. Although John Calvin and many other leading figures of the early tradition spoke about natural law in certain ways distinct from their medieval predecessors and understood it in vital connection to other aspects of Reformed doctrine, on the whole they seemed to affirm natural law as a catholic Christian idea that was not especially controversial and not in particular need of theological reform. They presented relatively little explicit reflection on how their distinctive Reformed understanding of a range of Christian doctrines ought to reconfigure a theology of natural law.

In the development of Reformed orthodoxy in the two centuries following the Reformation, natural law continued to be a ubiquitous presence tied intimately to multiple points in the fabric of its system of doctrine. Reformed theologians, for example, believed that natural law was part of the original endowment of human nature as created in the image of God and as such constituted an aspect of Adam’s obligation under the covenant of works. In some ways this has been a persistent theme in Reformed theology, though not without significant ambiguity. For sources and analysis of the ambiguity, see David VanDrunen, “Natural Law and the Works Principle Under Adam and Moses,” in The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant, ed. Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2009), pp. 286–91. For a recent Reformed work suggesting, though not developing in detail, the intimate connection between natural law and the covenant of works, see Michael S. Horton, Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), p. 94.

16. Many early Reformed theologians, for example, believed that natural law was part of the original endowment of human nature as created in the image of God and as such constituted an aspect of Adam's obligation under the covenant of works. In some ways this has been a persistent theme in Reformed theology, though not without significant ambiguity. For sources and analysis of the ambiguity, see David VanDrunen, “Natural Law and the Works Principle Under Adam and Moses,” in The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant, ed. Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2009), pp. 286–91. For a recent Reformed work suggesting, though not developing in detail, the intimate connection between natural law and the covenant of works, see Michael S. Horton, Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), p. 94.

17. David VanDrunen, Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); along similar lines, cf. Stephen Grabill, Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).
orthodox theologians connected natural law to such significant matters as the divine attributes, the image of God, the New Testament Sabbath, the Mosaic law, civil authority, Christian liberty, and the final judgment. Though many of these doctrines had a distinctive Reformed flavor in comparison to how other Christian traditions understood them, however, the early Reformed theologians generally did not develop natural law itself in a distinctively Reformed way. The existence of a law of nature and its general association with the moral law summarized in the Decalogue could be assumed from the earlier medieval natural law traditions and contemporary Roman Catholic and Lutheran theologies. Like so many Christian theologians before them, the early Reformed theologians appealed to Romans 2:14-15 as a biblical proof-text and defined a relationship between natural and Mosaic law similar to that of their predecessors.

In the present, when the general validity of natural law can no longer be readily assumed, either in Reformed theological circles or in the broader cultural ethos, a more detailed and robust exposition of natural law seems in order. I attempt to provide such an exposition through the integration of natural law with Reformed covenant theology. This approach builds a detailed theology of natural law from the Reformed tradition’s own resources rather than staking out a place for natural law within Reformed Christianity by imposing foreign theological constructs upon it. Yet by working with covenantal themes that are explicitly biblical I also hope to commend my conclusions to those working in other Christian traditions and hence to contribute to broader discussions about the place of natural law in Christian theology and ethics.

From the early days of Reformed Christianity its theologians identified the divine covenants recorded in Scripture as a major theme in the development of the biblical story and thus made it a key organizing principle of their

18. Many of these connections are evident in the numerous references to natural law in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, the confessional standards of traditional Presbyterian churches worldwide since the mid-seventeenth century. See Westminster Confession of Faith 1.1; 1.6; 4.2; 10.4; 20.4; 21.1; 21.7; and Westminster Larger Catechism 2, 17, 60, 121, 151.

19. In Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms I explored the intimate connection of historic Reformed views of natural law with historic Reformed views of the two kingdoms doctrine. I stand in that tradition of framing natural law within the context of the two kingdoms. I believe that seeking to understand natural law through Reformed covenant theology is essentially the same endeavor, since a theology of the kingdom(s) and a theology of the covenants are so organically interrelated (as I have argued in David VanDrunen, Living in God’s Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture [Wheaton: Crossway, 2010]). Nevertheless, in this present volume it has seemed better to me to use the latter rather than the former as the chief theological motif for grounding natural law.
Theological systems. The most basic and important idea that came to characterize mature Reformed covenant theology is the distinction between the covenant of works (also referred to as the covenant of life, covenant of nature, or covenant of creation — I employ the latter term here) and the covenant of grace. God made the former with Adam, as the federal representative of the human race, before the fall into sin, promising eternal life in confirmed blessedness if he proved obedient and threatening condemnation and death if not. Following the primeval sin, God instituted the covenant of grace. In this covenant God also held out the prospect of eternal life in confirmed blessedness, but offered it not as a reward for personal obedience (now impossible for fallen human beings) but as a gracious gift to be received by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, who perfectly obeyed God's will as the first Adam should have done and took upon himself the penalty for human sin. Thus the covenant of grace provides a way of salvation that both displays God's rich mercy and satisfies the claims of divine justice.

Reformed theologians understood this covenant of grace to be administered in different ways through biblical history, by a series of distinct but organically connected covenantal arrangements, especially with Abraham, Israel at Sinai, and the New Testament church. (A terminological note: I agree with this traditional Reformed notion that there is a single, organically unified covenant of grace throughout biblical history, with distinct administrations. As explained again in Chapter 6, however, I will generally refer to the “covenants of grace” rather than the “covenant of grace” when I have the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and new covenants in view. I do not mean


21. For confessional summary of these points, see especially the Westminster Confession of Faith, chaps. 7 and 11. In order to capture the relationship between the work of Christ and the covenant of grace made with sinners in the midst of history, many Reformed theologians also identified a third biblical covenant, often called the covenant of redemption (or referred to by its common Latin title, the pactum salutis). The covenant of redemption described an eternal, intra-Trinitarian covenant by which the divine persons counseled together to ordain the plan of salvation to be accomplished in the coming of the Son and the sending of the Spirit. For description and defense of this idea of the covenant of redemption, see David VanDrunen and R. Scott Clark, “The Covenant before the Covenants,” in Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California, ed. R. Scott Clark (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007), pp. 167-96.
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to detract from their organic unity but simply to avoid confusion for readers unfamiliar with parochial Reformed language.)

The covenant with Noah after the great flood was not a major point of focus for classic Reformed covenant theology, but it is very important for the present volume. Many Reformed theologians have taken this covenant to be one of the covenants of grace. Other Reformed theologians, impressed by the fact that God made this covenant with every living creature and offered no promise of salvation in it, treated this as a covenant distinct from the covenants of grace, though not wholly unrelated to them. According to the latter theologians, this is a universal covenant by which God preserves the natural order and human society. I hold this view and will defend it at length. Grounding postlapsarian natural law in the Noahic covenant, so understood, permits one to affirm both the universal relevance of the natural law for all human beings and the origin of natural law in the character and will of God. The “natural” need not be simplistically contrasted with the “covenantal,” as if one is rational and the other a revelation of the divine will.

22. Thus Reformed readers should not think that my use of “covenants of grace” terminology reflects any disagreement with the closing sentence of the Westminster Confession of Faith, 7.6: “There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.”


24. Something of this contrast lingers even in Jewish scholars intrigued by connections between natural law and the so-called Noachide commands binding upon Gentiles. A good example appears in Nahum Sarna, Genesis (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 377. As I read David Novak, some of his analysis of these questions also reflects this contrast (e.g., see Natural Law in Judaism, pp. 13, 145), though in more recent works the contrast seems muted and perhaps in part overcome; e.g., see The Jewish Social Contract: An Essay in Political Theology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), chap. 2.
of natural law without identifying natural law ethics with a uniquely Christian ethics. The natural law remains critically important for Christians as they continue to live in this world preserved through the Noahic covenant, but the ethics of this natural law cannot be collapsed into the ethics of the kingdom of God as announced by Jesus, whose uniqueness, anchored in the redemptive work of Christ and faith in him, must be accounted for.25

My basic argument in this book is that God promulgates the natural law in covenant relationships with human beings, who are rulers of the created world under him. He did so originally in a covenant of creation, with Adam as divine image-bearer and representative of the human race, in which natural law made known both humanity’s basic moral obligations and humanity’s eschatological destiny of new creation upon performance of the obligations. After the fall into sin, God continues to promulgate natural law, though in refracted form through the covenant with Noah, by which he preserves the first creation while postponing its final judgment. In the midst of this human history governed by God’s preservative grace under the covenant with Noah, God also has enacted a plan of salvation by which human beings will attain the original goal, the new creation, through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ. As God gathers a redeemed people through a series of gracious covenants through history, he calls them to continue acknowledging and honoring the norms of the natural law in common with all humanity, even while he reveals with increasing clarity their citizenship in the new creation, in which the natural law, as it now exists, no longer binds.

Before describing my case in more detail through a summary of the arguments developed in each chapter, I first provide some points of clarification on a few key issues for this volume: its working definition of natural law, its understanding of covenant, its approach to Scripture, and its purpose and audience.

In regard to the first of these points, I am hesitant to present a short definition of natural law, due to all the nuances and clarifications that any brief

25. Porter notes that Protestant scholars writing about natural law generally focus upon the theological significance of the natural, which leads to seeing natural law as a basis for a distinctively Christian theological ethic. She seems to equate the “theological” reflection on natural law with what is distinctively “Christian” and herself wants to make natural law and Scripture a unified source for Christian ethics. See Nature as Reason, pp. 325-26, 332. While my exploration of the theological significance of the natural does fit her basic description of Protestant tendencies, I believe that interpreting the Noahic covenant as a universal covenant of common grace permits theological analysis of natural law even while distinguishing it from what is uniquely Christian.
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definition would demand. Nevertheless, I offer the following, which I believe accurately, though incompletely, captures the ideas I develop in the following chapters: natural law consists in the obligations and consequences incumbent upon and known by human beings as image-bearers of God and participants in the protological moral order.26 As this definition hints, I affirm that natural law is law, since it communicates binding obligations and consequences from an authority (God) outside of human persons themselves. But this is not law in the contemporary positivistic sense of a collection of discrete rules. Rather, I treat natural law as law in the sense of being a normative moral order communicated through nature, though this moral order can be helpfully summarized through general rules (such as “have dominion” and “be fruitful and multiply,” or the principles of the Decalogue). This does not mean that the natural moral order is itself a complete ethical system, for it requires individuals and societies to put it into concrete application through their divinely bestowed creative freedom, and this can happen potentially in many different cultural forms. But the natural moral order itself is divine revelation, and precedes special revelation insofar as God always delivers the latter to human beings whom he created as participants in the natural order and designed by nature to respond to God in certain ways.27 As I argue especially in Chapter 8, perhaps the key human attribute necessary for understanding the natural law (as moral order) and putting it into practice is wisdom.28

Second, a few comments on my use of “covenant” may be helpful. As with “natural law,” I am also hesitant to offer a neat and concise definition of “covenant.” One reason is that the various covenants in Scripture do not all take the same form. Historically, Reformed theologians have identified basic

26. When seeing this reference to “moral order” (here or in the book’s title), some readers may think of Oliver O’Donovan’s influential volume Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). Though O’Donovan does not approach his subject in terms of “natural law” (for reasons he explains), many of the questions he wrestles with there are the same as those I address here. Many of O’Donovan’s conclusions are attractive, particularly his defense of the created moral order as an objective reality. Yet I do not find sufficient (or even entirely clear) how he explains the relationship between the original created order and the eschatological new creation, a question central for his book, as well as for mine.

27. This distinction between natural revelation (of which natural law is an aspect) and special revelation (the spoken or written word of God, ordinarily delivered through prophets) is standard in Reformed theology; e.g., Herman Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 1, Prolegomena, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), chaps. 10-11.

 Divine Covenants and Moral Order

criteria that characterize biblical covenants (for example, they involve contracting parties, conditions, promises, and penalties), but they recognized certain distinctions between different kinds of covenants, most notably the difference between the requirement of perfect personal obedience for blessing in the covenant of works at creation and the free bestowal of blessing upon sinners, received by faith alone, in the covenants of grace. The biblical covenants have been a topic of considerable interest to recent generations of biblical scholars. Some of them, like earlier Reformed theologians, have recognized the importance of covenant as a unifying theme in the Scriptures. Though biblical scholars have developed competing proposals, they recognize the presence of different kinds of covenants, differentiated by the type of relationship between the covenanting parties and the kind of obligations one or both parties assume.

In the chapters that follow I understand the biblical covenants to be solemn and ordinarily oath-bound agreements that establish God and human beings in formal relationships that entail obligations for both parties and consequences for fidelity or lack thereof. As we will see in subsequent chapters, however, the nature of these relationships, the types of obligations, and the conditions for reception of blessing and curse vary significantly from covenant to covenant.

Third, stating a few words about my approach to Scripture is important


30. E.g., see Richard E. Friedman, “The Hiding of the Face: An Essay on the Literary Unity of Biblical Narrative,” in Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel, ed. Jacob Neusner et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 215, as quoted in Scott W. Hahn, Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 25: “If we could delete all references to covenant [in the Old Testament] — which we cannot do, precisely because it is regularly integral to its contexts — we would have an anthology of stories. As it is we have a structure that can house a plot.” Cf. Paul R. Williamson, Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God’s Unfolding Purpose (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), pp. 29-30: “Covenant is without a doubt one of the most important motifs in biblical theology, attested to not only by the traditional labels applied to the respective parts of the Christian Bible, but also by the fact that the concept looms large at important junctures throughout the Bible. It underpins God’s relationship with Noah, Abraham, Israel, the Levitical priesthood and the Davidic dynasty. It is also used with respect to God’s relationship with the reconstituted ‘Israel’ of the future. Therefore, while ‘biblical’ and ‘covenant theology’ must certainly not be confused as synonymous, covenant is indisputably one of the Bible’s core theological themes.”

31. For a concise description of how various scholars have identified the different types of biblical covenants, see Hahn, Kinship by Covenant, pp. 28-31.

32. I recognize that some biblical covenants are made between two human parties. Though I will mention a couple of these, my chief concern for purposes of this theology of natural law is the series of divine-human covenants.
in light of the space I devote to biblical exegesis. All of the biblical books have human authors, who display their own particular gifts and utilize a range of literary genres, and these different authors present distinct perspectives even when treating similar subjects. Yet I affirm with historic Christianity that all of Scripture is God's word; that is, God is also the author of the biblical books — indeed, the ultimate author — and the prophets and apostles who served as their human authors wrote under divine inspiration and with divine authority. This means, most significantly for this volume, that I believe all the teaching of Scripture is coherent and internally harmonious, despite the multiple human authors with the various genres they employ and perspectives they present. Furthermore, I adhere to the traditional Reformation axiom, dating back to the early church, that Scripture is its own best interpreter. This implies that biblical interpreters today should use clearer parts of Scripture to understand less clear parts. It also implies that later parts of Scripture that interpret earlier parts provide normative guidance for our own interpretation of the latter (though it is also true, in the other direction, that earlier parts of Scripture are crucial background for understanding later parts). In light of these convictions, I not only seek to do careful exegesis of particular texts in their original context but also to interpret them in light of the entire canon of Scripture.

33. I recognize that with these comments I wade into an area of significant scholarly debate (outside of my own fields of specialty) and, certainly with respect to using the New Testament (NT) to interpret the Old Testament (OT), I am taking a position different from what is typically found among scholars engaged in grammatical-historical exegesis. An influential book on the question of how the NT interprets the OT has been Richard Longenecker, Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975). Without wishing to oversimplify challenging questions about the apostolic hermeneutic and Christians' use of it today, I would disagree with Longenecker's essential conclusion that contemporary Christian exegesis should follow the apostolic hermeneutic insofar as it follows grammatical-historical norms; see Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period, p. 219. As a general matter, it seems to me that the direction should be reversed: rather than the apostles' interpretation of the OT being normed by the standards of the contemporary grammatical-historical exegesis, contemporary grammatical-historical exegesis should be subservient to the apostles' interpretation of the OT. On these matters I appreciate the approach in Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), pp. 63-69. For a recent book exploring related issues, see Christopher R. Seitz, The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

34. What will also be evident to readers is that I deal with Scripture in terms of the completed canon. If, as Scobie puts it, “a canonical biblical theology is not based on historical reconstructions, but on the Bible in its completed form,” then my book is a kind of canonical biblical theology. See Scobie, The Ways of Our God, p. 183.
The fourth and final point of clarification concerns the purpose and audience of this book. This book offers a *theological* account of natural law, organically related to broader Christian traditions of natural law thought, but developed here specifically through the exegesis of relevant parts of Scripture in the context of the biblical story as a whole. I do not engage natural law through nontheological disciplines such as philosophy, biology, sociology, or cultural anthropology. This is not meant to prohibit or discourage others from doing so (quite the contrary), but does seek to provide important theological foundation, justification, and boundaries for Christians who pursue such work. I also do not offer a detailed strategy for bringing the claims of natural law to bear in the pluralistic public square or extensively develop how natural law should serve as a foundation for or check upon civil law, though these too are important matters for which a biblical theology of natural law should provide much material for further reflection.

Is knowledge of the natural law itself unavailable apart from knowledge of such a biblical theology of natural law? No. The very point of the concept of natural law is that objective moral obligations are known, in some way and to some degree, by all human beings. What this study seeks to provide is a biblical explanation of what this natural law is, why it exists, and what relation it has to the divine plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. Thus the audience for this book is primarily Christians, who, though thankful for the knowledge of God’s law that exists even among those who know nothing of this biblical background, wish to understand the biblical-theological foundations of natural law, at least in order to clarify their own natural knowledge of God’s law and to be better able to integrate this knowledge with their broader Christian faith and life. Accordingly, this volume also serves as a general study in Christian ethics and moral theology, rather than as simply a narrow study in natural law. Non-Christians may also benefit from this book if they wish to understand better what Christians believe and what their Scriptures teach about natural law, as well as about the gospel of Jesus Christ, in whom the natural order of the present world will be brought to consummation.

In light of these points of clarification, I now provide an overview of how my argument develops in the following chapters. Part 1 (Chapters 1-5) deals with the covenantal foundations of the natural moral order and how Scripture describes the role of natural law with respect to the human race in general. I begin with the covenant of creation that governed the original world and then consider the covenant with Noah that governs creation as fallen yet divinely sustained. These covenants are *protological*, in that they are God’s means for ruling the *first creation*, that is, this present world in which we live.
Chapter 1 addresses the covenant of creation and focuses particularly on Genesis 1–2. In this covenant God revealed himself in the natural order and especially in human persons as created in the divine image. God made human beings, as image-bearers, to know by nature their basic moral obligations before God and to understand their eschatological destiny of life in a new creation. Designed to image the Creator God as he revealed himself in Genesis 1–2, human beings were to be culturally creative, lovingly generous, and perfectly just.

In Chapter 2 I explore the Noahic covenant of Genesis 8:20–9:17, a covenant of preservation or “common grace” (a term I introduce in the next section). The fall into sin brought devastating consequences upon the natural order and human nature, and thus the natural law did not pass unchanged into the postlapsarian world. In Genesis 9 God entered into a covenant with both the natural order and the human race, promising to uphold and preserve his creation, albeit in fallen form. God promised to uphold the regularity of the cosmic order and reaffirmed the nature of humanity as his own image, and thereby continues to reveal his law by nature. Genesis 9 indicates that this natural law provides at least a basic, minimal ethic designed for the preservation of the social order. It also hints at a broader cultural responsibility for the human race that resembles humanity’s cultural responsibility under the covenant of creation, but only as refracted for a fallen context. Yet rather than orient human beings by nature to life in a new creation, as in the original covenant with Adam, the image of God preserved in the Noahic covenant reminds them of their condemnation because of sin before a just God. The covenant with Noah itself provides no eschatological hope, only temporal preservation.

Chapters 3–4 continue Part 1 by examining a number of subsequent Old Testament texts and considering God’s government of the nations of the world through the natural law, as they live under the auspices of the Noahic covenant. In distinction from God’s special covenant people — the Abrahamic, Israelite, and church communities — God holds the nations of the world accountable to him primarily through the natural law rather than through his revealed word. Consistent with what Genesis 9 suggests, Chapter 3 argues that there are both a negative and a positive side to God’s postlapsarian government of the world through natural law. Negatively, the story of Sodom in Genesis 18–19 manifests how the natural law maintains a witness to God’s righteous judgment against sin, through a great anticipation of the final judicial reckoning, which was postponed, but not canceled, by the Noahic covenant. Positively, the story of Abraham’s conflict with Abimelech in Genesis 20 shows the natural law as God’s instrument for maintaining a sense of justice and civil order among a
pagan people who were foreigners to Abraham’s covenant household. Chapter 4 extends this analysis through a study of the Old Testament prophetic oracles against foreign nations and the court scenes in Daniel. I argue that these texts also display God holding the nations of the world accountable to his judgment through the natural law, in ways consistent with what the Noahic covenant indicates.

Chapter 5 concludes Part 1 through a detailed study of that *locus classicus* of Christian natural law theory, Romans 1:18–2:16. I argue that this text does indeed speak of natural law, and in fact provides the most focused biblical description of the revelation of divine law in nature, especially in its universal relevance in God’s just government of the world. Romans 1:18–2:16 both confirms the conclusions of previous chapters regarding natural law under the Noahic covenant and enriches the picture as to what this natural law requires.

In Part 2 I explore the covenants of grace, as they are progressively revealed through redemptive history, and the significance of natural law for God’s redeemed people at each stage in this history. While the covenant of creation and covenant with Noah are *protological*, in that they govern the natural moral order of this present creation, the covenants of grace reveal the *eschatological* realities of the new creation, incipiently in the Old Testament and more fully in the New Testament, until the new creation is fully manifest at the second coming of Christ. These redemptive covenants do not themselves govern the protological natural order, but point beyond it to an eschatological natural order to be revealed on the last day. Yet until that day these covenants show great interest in how God’s people should conduct themselves while still living in this present world, and for this task natural law continues to play a crucial role.

Chapter 6 introduces the covenants of grace and examines the Abrahamic covenant in particular. Though God’s promises of redemption began long before, his covenant with Abraham marks the first formalized covenant relationship that promises the grace of salvation. Though this covenant pointed to a coming Messianic seed and the blessing of redemption for all peoples, it distinguished but did not separate the covenant people from the pagan nations around them, calling them to live in their midst as sojourners and active participants in their cultural life. In this context, God desired his covenant people to learn his ways of righteousness and justice, revealed in part through the natural law. Natural law also served as the common objective moral standard enabling them to enjoy a measure of peaceful coexistence with some foreign cities around them.

Chapter 7 considers the next great biblical covenant, the covenant with
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Israel, through Moses, at Mount Sinai. This chapter confronts a weighty but difficult issue, the relationship of Mosaic law and natural law. The New Testament interprets the Mosaic covenant as a temporary arrangement designed to prepare God's people of old in various ways for the coming Messiah. Chapter 7 focuses on one of the ways it accomplished this task, namely, by bringing Israel through a recapitulation of Adam's experience in the covenant of creation. The Mosaic law played a key role in this dynamic, detailing the people's obligations to God and promising them blessing upon obedience and threatening curse upon disobedience. In doing so, the Mosaic law reflected both the substance and the sanctions of the natural law. I argue that God intended the Mosaic law (in part) to be a republication of the natural law designed for the unique circumstances of Old Testament Israel. The Mosaic law thereby served to make Israel a microcosm of the whole human family, showcasing the plight of all sinful humanity living under the protological natural law.

Chapter 8 turns to the Old Testament wisdom literature, particularly Proverbs. Proverbs significantly enriches this volume's portrayal of natural law by highlighting the presence of a moral order pervading this world. Though Proverbs originated during Israel's life under the Mosaic covenant, it provides moral instruction not through written law but by training readers how to observe and reflect upon the natural moral order and then to draw appropriate practical conclusions that lead to success and flourishing. Wisdom — understood as perception of the natural moral order and effective structuring of one's life within its bounds — was absolutely necessary for Israel if she was to put the Mosaic law into faithful practice. But Proverbs also portrays wisdom as an international phenomenon, attainable to a certain degree even by those outside the special covenant people. Thus Proverbs further testifies both to the significance of natural law for the covenant community and to the presence and power of natural law in the broader world.

Part 2 concludes with a study of natural law and the new covenant. In this crucial Chapter 9 I argue that through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, as the Last Adam, believers in him have passed through the judgment coming upon the human race under the protological natural law and have become citizens of the new creation even now. Their identity is chiefly defined by this new creation, which is the eschatological consummation of the first creation and its natural order. Yet until Christ's second coming Christians live in the overlap of two ages, for though citizens of the age-to-come, God calls them for a time to continue living peaceful and productive lives in this present age. To put my point concisely, under the new covenant Christians have been released from the protological natural law at an
ultimate level, since they no longer stand under its judgment and are citizens of a new creation with its own consummated, eschatological moral order. Yet at a penultimate level they must continue to live within the structures of this present world and thus under the authority of the protological natural law. Thus the natural law still plays a crucial normative role for the moral lives of New Testament believers, even while their distinctive moral identity in Christ simultaneously gives testimony to the imminent passing away of the natural law in its present form, at the consummation of all things in the new creation.

The book concludes with Chapter 10, which first summarizes and integrates the arguments of previous chapters. I then explain why I believe developing a sound theology of natural law is useful and even necessary for Christians seeking to live faithful, productive, peaceful, and vigilant lives in this “present evil age” (Gal. 1:4). Finally, the chapter closes with reflections on the implications of natural law for some key issues in political and legal theory, including the nature of justice and the good of religious liberty.

This Present Project and the Broader Christian Natural Law Traditions

As already mentioned, this biblical theology of natural law is organically connected to historic Christian natural law traditions. In the remainder of the chapter I explain this claim in more detail. To summarize, I believe that my project, in many significant ways, stands in continuity with the perennially important natural law theory of Thomas Aquinas, but also is biblically reformed in other important respects. I present this project in the spirit of the Reformation, which was not a total break with the medieval heritage but a reform movement. In addition, though my proposal is basically premodern, insofar as it roots natural law in an objectively real and meaningful created order and ultimately in the authority of God himself, it is also modern, insofar

35. As a broad generalization, people in classical and premodern times, as Steven D. Smith puts it, understood the world they inhabited to be “intrinsically normative or purposeful”; see The Disenchantment of Secular Discourse (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 21. In contrast, the modern world seeks to stamp its own meaning upon the world, rather than discover its meaning. The now-famous words of Justice Kennedy in the Casey decision of the United States Supreme Court perhaps emblematize the modern attitude as well as anything: “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” As Alasdair MacIntyre describes it, the modern perspective on ethics is characterized by “emotivism,” “the doctrine that all
as it understands natural law in a way (critically) supportive of the modern Western experiment in religious liberty, in the face of the perceived crisis of secular liberalism in the West.

Thomas Aquinas was not the first natural law theorist and was obviously not the last. But however one evaluates the soundness of his understanding of natural law, it has proven to be the most enduring and perennially relevant in the history of Christian thought. In light of its eminent status, I focus this section on reflecting where my biblical theology of natural law stands in relation to Thomas’s understanding. Without seeking to be exhaustive, I first identify six points at which I see significant continuity between Thomas’s understanding and my own project and then two areas where I believe important biblical and theological considerations suggest the need for reform in Thomistic theory.

A first point at which I see my project’s continuity with Thomas is his metaphysical and epistemological realism. Thomas believed that things in this world (including human beings) have objectively meaningful natures, and that human nature entails certain obligations and rights, knowledge of which is accessible to the human mind. I too affirm these ideas. An important theme in Thomas’s metaphysics and epistemology, and, correspondingly, in his understanding of natural law, was his notion of participation. Thomas’s most basic definition of natural law, in fact, makes use of this theme: natural law is the “participation of the eternal law in the rational creature” (participatio legis aeternae in rationali creatura). Since, for Thomas, eternal law represents the government of the universe by the divine reason, such words may suggest some point of intersection between the human and divine minds, some mea-

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36. I recognize that how exactly to characterize Thomas’s epistemology is a disputed question. Without wishing to delve into more technical debates, I take Eleanore Stump’s general summary as accurate: “Like Aristotle, Aquinas is a metaphysical realist. That is, he assumes that there is an external world around us and that it has certain features independently of the operation of any created intellect, so that it is up to our minds to discover truths about the world, rather than simply inventing or creating them. On Aquinas’s account, the human intellect was created by God for the purpose of discovering such truths about the world.” See Aquinas (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 231.


38. Summa Theologiae, 1a2ae 91.1.
sure of univocity between God and humanity, and therefore a compromise of the fundamental Christian doctrine of the absolute distinction between the infinite creator and his finite creation. But Thomas did not intend his words to convey this meaning. He rejected a univocal understanding of the God-human relationship and argued instead for an *analogical* relationship. In other words, there is an absolute difference between the being and mind of God and the being and mind of human beings, but within this absolute difference is also a likeness or similarity. Thus rational and moral human attributes reflect those of God, such that human beings can bear his image and be true causes of effects in this world, without thereby compromising God’s identity as the first cause of all things.\(^{39}\) In Thomas’s definition of natural law mentioned above, therefore, human beings (as rational creatures) are enabled to play a genuine role in the government of the world while always standing under God’s supreme government, doing works that are truly their own while existing under God’s ultimate causality.\(^{40}\) Though I do not utilize the terminology of “participation” in the technical metaphysical way that Thomas does, my treatment of the image of God, in the context of the covenant of creation and the Noahic covenant (especially in Chapters 1-2), communicates many of the same ideas: though there is an absolute distinction between God and human beings, God has made them in his image, to exercise rule in this world under his ultimate authority, as they know by nature a moral standard that reflects God’s own character and his own actions in his government of the world.

A second point at which I see my project’s continuity with Thomas’s thought is his conception of human nature being ordered to something beyond itself. Below I critically engage some important aspects of Thomas’s famous paradigm — grace perfects nature — but here I wish to express appreciation for his affirmation, following many prominent theologians before him, that humanity’s ultimate end, established before the fall into sin and renewed


40. Thomas’s definition of natural law, in its immediate context, reads: “The rational creature is subject to Divine providence in the most excellent way, in so far as it partakes of a share of providence, by being provident both for itself and for others. Wherefore it has a share of the Eternal Reason, whereby it has natural inclination to its proper act and end: and this participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called the natural law.” See *Summa Theologiae*, 122ae 91.2. I am grateful to Russell Hittinger and Manfred Svensson for helpful counsel to me on this issue.
through salvation in Christ, was something unattainable within the confines of the original creation. For Thomas, humanity’s highest end is the beatific vision of God, attained through supernatural grace.\footnote{Summa Theologiae, 1a2ae 3:8; 109.5. Among earlier theologians, Augustine, for example, saw humanity as destined for eschatological life even before the fall, upon condition of faithful obedience: God created man “in such sort, that if he remained in subjection to His Creator as his rightful Lord, and piously kept His commandments, he should pass into the company of the angels, and obtain, without the intervention of death, a blessed and endless immortality.” See The City of God, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 406 (Book 12, Section 21).} Despite some significant differences with Thomas’s scheme, my account also understands God to have created human beings for an eschatological end transcending the present world and to have renewed their hope of attaining it through the work of Christ.

A third point of continuity with Thomas’s thought is his sensitivity to the movement of human beings through a state of original integrity to a fallen condition and then to a state of grace. For Thomas, the human nature with which God endowed his image-bearers at creation survived, but was wounded by, the fall; and grace, through Christ, both heals the wounds of nature and elevates it to its supernatural end.\footnote{Summa Theologiae, 1a2ae 109.} I critically evaluate some aspects of this scheme as well, but the historical movement from a covenant of creation (concerning human nature’s original integrity) to a covenant of common grace (concerning human nature’s preservation, though in a corrupted state), which in turn is foundational for the covenants of grace (concerning human nature’s redemption through Christ), is a central dynamic for my present project.

Fourth, Thomas understood the natural law more in terms of a moral order than a series of discrete rules. Natural law, for Thomas, is encapsulated in one rule — pursue good and shun evil — but this is so general that it is of little concrete usefulness. More specific rules (such as those of the Decalogue) can also be understood through practical reason, but even these do not capture the natural law comprehensively, for natural law pertains to all things to which human beings are inclined by nature.\footnote{Summa Theologiae, 1a2ae 94.2-3; 100.1.} Though again I develop these matters differently, the idea of natural law in terms of moral order rather than discrete rules is also important to the theology of natural law for which I argue in subsequent chapters.

A fifth point of continuity lies in the relation Thomas perceived between natural law and human civil law. For Thomas, human law ought to be grounded in the natural law, and any “law” not grounded in natural law is a...
perversion of law. Yet there is no single civil code that is necessarily derived from natural law, for human beings must exercise prudence and be attentive to social circumstances in order to apply the moral foundation of the natural law in suitable and effective ways for particular times and places. Though my present study does not focus on civil law per se, I do portray the natural moral order as the soil from which civil law ought to grow. Yet, with Thomas, I do not view natural law itself as teaching a detailed political system or policy agenda, but as providing basic moral boundaries within which responsible human agents can develop concrete legal systems.

Sixth and finally, I see continuity with Thomas’s work in his interest in integrating natural law into a broader biblical moral theology. For Thomas, human beings know natural law by reason, but Thomas was not content to examine natural law independently of Scripture. Not only did he believe that Scripture teaches about natural law, but he also interpreted the content and effects of natural law in conjunction with the content and effects of biblical commands, or what he called “divine law.” For example, he believed that natural law lay at the heart of the moral core of the Mosaic law and also undergirded its judicial aspect. Though my conclusions do not always match Thomas’s interest in such integration of natural law and biblical moral teaching pervades this volume, whose longest chapter, in fact, concerns the relation of natural law and Mosaic law.

These aspects of continuity between Thomas’s theory of natural law and my proposal in the present volume are, I believe, substantive and significant. My project stands in organic continuity with this most enduring of medieval accounts of natural law. But as a Reformed theologian I also believe that the reformation of medieval church and theology was necessary for the health of Christianity. Accordingly, as I approach a Thomistic perspective on natural law critically, in the light of my reading of Scripture with the church and especially with the Reformed tradition, I also see matters of discontinuity between Thomas’s theory and what I develop here. I mention two in particular, one that I discuss briefly and the other at greater length.

The first matter of discontinuity relates to the larger metaphysics in which Thomas’s understanding of natural law is embedded. The embedding in a metaphysics is not a problem; presumably every coherent view of natural

44. Summa Theologiae, 1a2ae 95.2.
45. Summa Theologiae, 1a2ae 95.2; 96.2.
46. E.g., in Romans 2:14; see Summa Theologiae, 1a2ae 91.2.
47. Summa Theologiae, 1a2ae 100.1; 104.1, 3.
law involves some metaphysical ideas, whether explicitly or implicitly, whether
developed theologically or philosophically. Rather, I wish briefly to engage
Thomistic metaphysics in regard to God’s existence and the implications for
natural law. In Thomistic metaphysics one begins with a philosophical study of
this world and the being that one experiences in this world, and thereby comes
to identify the essence of human nature and a more detailed metaphysics gen-
erally. The philosopher cannot gain knowledge of God’s being itself through
this study, but can draw conclusions about the existence of a God who is the
first cause. The existence of God, therefore, is metaphysically demonstrated a
posteriori, not something presumed from the outset of investigation.48

Many Reformed theologians working within so-called Kuyperian
or neo-Calvinist circles have been critical of this metaphysical approach.49
Though I have reservations about some aspects of these circles’ interpreta-
tion of Thomas (about which more below), I believe they identify a genuine
difficulty at this point. My chief concern about this Thomistic approach to
metaphysics is twofold: it presumes that human beings can investigate nature
while holding accountability to God in abeyance (at least for a time), and
it seems to make natural knowledge of God and one’s place before him (at
best) a privilege of the learned. A number of biblical texts call such ideas into
question. Scripture indeed teaches a knowledge of God in nature, but not
one that comes at the end of a philosophical investigation. It is not so much
that human beings find God in nature as that through nature God proclaims
and reveals himself to them: “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the
sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night
to night reveals knowledge” (Ps. 19:1-2); “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

48. For a recent explanation of these themes and a robust defense of Thomistic meta-
physics, see Thomas Joseph White, O.P., *Wisdom in the Face of Modernity: A Study in Thomistic*
*Natural Theology* (Ave Maria, FL: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2009).
49. Perhaps none more critical than Cornelius Van Til; see e.g. *Christian Apologetics*
hold to the Christian theory of reality Thomas Aquinas and his modern followers in effect
follow Aristotle in speaking first of being in general and in introducing the distinction between
divine being and created being afterwards. The consequences are fatal both for systematic
theology and for apologetics. For systematic theology it means that God is not unequivocally
taken to be the source of man’s being and the controlling power over his actions. Every doc-
trine is bound to be false if the first and basic doctrine of God is false.” It is worth noting that
Thomas, despite his metaphysical method, does in fact affirm God as the source of man’s being
and the controlling power over his actions.
plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes,
namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever
since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they
are without excuse” (Rom. 1:18-20). The created world relentlessly impresses
upon human beings not only the existence but also something of the char-
acter of God. And it does this clearly, such that all humans know their basic
moral obligations before him (though they suppress this knowledge) and are
held duly accountable. I do not claim that Scripture treats serious intellectual
reflection as worthless for understanding the natural law (a point refuted
at least by Proverbs). But biblical teaching makes suspect any metaphysical
method that permits investigation of nature by philosophers who function
as uncommitted even to the very existence of God during the course of their
investigation, and Scripture calls into question any model that makes only
those with sophisticated philosophical training capable of understanding the
existence of God through nature. Nature confronts every person at every mo-
ment with God and his claims, and at every moment demands a response, to
which God holds each accountable. If this is the case, then a decision about
God cannot be postponed until the end of a long process of investigating
nature. I take it that the Thomistic approach falls short on this point, and I
will attempt to defend the point in subsequent chapters (though I make only
modest epistemological claims concerning natural law, because I do not be-
lieve a biblical theology of natural law permits more than this).

A second point at which I see discontinuity between Thomas’s account
of natural law and my own demands a more lengthy discussion: the famous
Thomistic formula that grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it (gratia
non tollat naturam sed perficit).

In many respects, the way one resolves the so-called nature and grace issue is fundamental for any Christian theory of
natural law, and this is true for the present book. Here I wish to bring into
the discussion a certain Reformed school of thought mentioned above, some-
times referred to as Kuyperian or neo-Calvinist. Though this has not been
a unified movement, those associated with it display important affinities in
thought and characteristically build upon the work of late-nineteenth- and

50. Perhaps illustrated well by White’s defense and description of Thomistic metaphys-
ic in the following words: “The primary being, for Aquinas, has an ontological priority with
regard to all others, but for us this is discovered last.” See Wisdom in the Face of Modernity,
p. 160. At the same time, I recognize that Thomas does not necessarily delay consideration of
God in his writings; he approaches similar subjects in different ways depending upon what
he is writing and why.

51. E.g., Summa Theologiae, 1a 1, 8, ad.2.
early-twentieth-century Dutch figures Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. I reflect on neo-Calvinist views of natural law more specifically in Appendix 2. Here I wish to interact with its views on nature and grace and its critique of Thomas on this score, as a way to probe Thomas's position. In short, while I think neo-Calvinist critiques raise good issues, they do not always deal with Thomas himself entirely fairly and do not provide an adequate theological response to the problems that are in fact present in Thomas's understanding of nature and grace.

The precise shape of Thomas's view of nature and grace is a debated matter, even within Thomistic Roman Catholic circles. Many of the most penetrating Roman Catholic theologians of the twentieth century wrestled with questions of nature and grace. Some suggested that neo-scholastic thinkers such as Cajetan and Suarez had corrupted Thomas's view by positing a realm of “pure nature” and obscuring the allegedly more intimate connection of nature and grace in Thomas's thought. Without wishing to delve deeply into these intra-Catholic debates, I summarize Thomas's view of nature and grace in the following way: God created human beings with a certain kind of nature, which had its own natural and proximate ends. At their creation, however, God also bestowed supernatural gifts of grace upon them, which served to elevate human nature to enable them to do works meritorious of a supernatural end, namely, the beatific vision of God. Thus unfallen humanity was able to attain this supernatural end by grace. Through their fall into sin, however, human beings lost their supernatural gifts. Their human nature remained, though in a damaged and weakened state. In the economy of redemption, God restores to human beings the supernatural gifts of grace, which not only heal the powers of nature that they retained in damaged form, but also enable them again to do meritorious works by which they can attain the supernatural beatific vision. Thus, both before and after the fall, grace does not destroy but perfects nature.

Many prominent figures within neo-Calvinist circles are quite critical of Thomas and the so-called medieval synthesis of Greek philosophy and


53. See Summa Theologicae, 1a 95; 1a2ae 109.
Christian theology. The nature/grace motif is one of their prime targets for critique. As mentioned above, I do not always believe their critiques deal accurately with Thomas himself or offer the most helpful solutions to issues that I believe are indeed problematic in Thomas's theology. I now describe three aspects of their critique and offer some reflection on them.

One common aspect of neo-Calvinist critique is that Thomas's view implies that nature is inherently defective, because even before the fall nature required a superadded gift of grace in order to keep its internal tensions in check and to transcend its inherent limitations, and this compromises biblical affirmation of the goodness of the original creation. This critique raises a legitimate point of concern with respect to the presence of concupiscence in the prelapsarian natural human condition. Though all Christian theologians must struggle to explain how Adam was created very good yet was also able to sin, positing an inherent tension between his higher and lower natural faculties is, I agree, an unsatisfactory move. But in other respects it is not clear how a neo-Calvinist critique of supernatural gifts added on to Adam's natural endowments, as a general idea, can gain serious traction. For one thing, early Reformed theologians continued to speak of Adam's original condition in terms of natural and supernatural gifts, and thus the Reformation may not have represented a sharp break with medieval theology on this issue, as sometimes suggested. Furthermore, even when describing Adam's pre-fall state in distinctively Reformed terms, neo-Calvinists continue to suggest that God gave him some kind of additional endowment beyond what is reckoned as natural. Bavinck, for example, argues that Adam did not have natural knowledge of or ability to attain eschatological beatitude, but attained such only through God's establishment of the covenant of works (which thus effectively functions as a donum superadditum of a different sort).

A second common aspect of neo-Calvinist critique of Thomas and the medieval synthesis regards the effects of the fall. According to this critique, the


55. E.g., see Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, 2:546-47 (though Bavinck critiques "Rome" generally here, Thomas is often within his purview in this larger section).

56. See the helpful discussion of this point in Paul Helm, Calvin at the Centre (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 313-22.

57. Bavinck, Reformed Dogmatics, 2:571.
medieval synthesis held that human beings at the fall lost their supernatural gifts but not their natural gifts, and this idea does not properly account for the damage to human nature stemming from Adam's first transgression.\textsuperscript{58} One difficulty here is that Thomas himself clearly did not believe that human nature remained intact after the fall (though some later Roman Catholic thinkers may have spoken in this way), for he taught that natural human powers were weakened and damaged by sin.\textsuperscript{59} It is true that Reformed theologians have ordinarily spoken of the effects of the fall on human nature as more grave than did Thomas, but Thomas did wrestle seriously with sin and its effects. Also interesting to consider here is the neo-Calvinist claim that its categories of “common grace”/“saving grace” provide a better paradigm than does Thomas’s “nature”/“grace” categories for working through the issues at stake.\textsuperscript{60} As with the first point of critique, it is not evident here that neo-Calvinists offer an alternative that is really so different from Thomas's understanding. Neo-Calvinists agree with Thomists that nature was not destroyed by the fall, and affirm that human beings retain their human nature, however damaged, even apart from God’s work of redemption. What the category of common grace seems to do is explain how God preserves something of humanity’s original condition despite the devastation of the fall, while the category of nature identifies what it is that remains (which in turn is the material on which saving grace works). The categories of common grace/special grace and nature/grace seem to be complementary, rather than in competition.\textsuperscript{61}

A third important point of neo-Calvinist critique is that, insofar as the nature/grace terminology is retained, their “grace-restores-nature” paradigm is better than the Thomistic “grace-perfects-nature.” Some writers suggest that the former paradigm is crucial to understanding certain neo-Calvinist thinkers or even neo-Calvinism generally.\textsuperscript{62} What does it mean, then, to assert that grace restores nature? Read literally, it suggests that what grace does is recover

\textsuperscript{58} E.g., see Bavinck, \textit{Reformed Dogmatics}, 3:43. Though not mentioning Thomas in particular, he says that, for the “Roman Catholic dualism . . . cast aside by the Reformation,” “fallen nature is actually totally identical with uncorrupted nature” and “the natural gifts continue intact.”

\textsuperscript{59} E.g., see \textit{Summa Theologiae}, 1a2ae 109.2.


\textsuperscript{61} As was the case for Calvin, as Helm has argued in \textit{Calvin at the Centre}, pp. 325, 333.

\textsuperscript{62} According to John Bolt, for example, “The fundamental theme that shapes Bavinck’s entire theology is the Trinitarian idea that grace restores nature.” See “Editor’s Introduction,” in Bavinck, \textit{Reformed Dogmatics}, 1:18.
nature as it was before the fall, for “restoration” seems to presume an initial state of integrity to which something returns. Were this really what the paradigm means, it would be very problematic theologically, for Scripture never portrays redemption as returning human beings to their condition before the fall, but rather as granting eschatological gifts that Adam himself did not enjoy in Eden. But neo-Calvinist writers do not in fact intend the language of restoration to teach a return to a protological Paradise. Bavinck, perhaps the figure most associated with the grace-restores-nature paradigm, sometimes uses such language in the same breath as he asserts that grace brings nature to its highest state of existence, that is, to something much greater than its condition before the fall. 63 Once put this way, however, one wonders why “grace does not destroy nature but perfects it” is really such a bad way to put it.

This raises the question again whether there is as large a difference between the Thomistic and neo-Calvinist models as sometimes suggested (interestingly, both “restoration” and “perfection” are terms Scripture uses to describe redemption 64). The suggestion that there is not such a large difference gains plausibility from recent neo-Calvinist popular literature. This literature does not portray redemption in terms of a return to Eden, but does speak of it as putting human beings back on the track originally set before Adam and enabling them to carry out his cultural mandate once again, which in turn promotes and contributes to the coming of the kingdom and its full realization in the new creation. 65 This contemporary neo-Calvinist vision bears notable similarities to Thomas’s: both paradigms envision redemptive grace as enabling human beings to do the sorts of things that Adam was originally supposed to do and to attain an eschatological state of beatitude at the end of the process. Of course, to the extent that contemporary neo-Calvinists maintain a traditional Reformed soteriology, their views must differ from Thomas’s position on nature and grace in significant ways, especially on whether the work

63. E.g., see Reformed Dogmatics, 3:577: “It is the same treasure that was promised in the covenant of works and is granted in the covenant of grace. Grace restores nature and takes it to its highest pinnacle, though it does not add to it any new and heterogeneous constituents.” Cf. 2:573: “Christ does not [merely] restore his own to the state of Adam before the fall. He acquired and bestows much more, namely, that which Adam would have received had he not fallen. He positions us not at the beginning but at the end of the journey that Adam had to complete. He accomplished not only the passive but also the active obedience required; he not only delivers us from guilt and punishment, but out of grace immediately grants us the right to eternal life.”

64. Among other examples, see Acts 3:21 and Hebrews 12:23.

65. E.g., see Albert M. Wolters, Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 11, 57-60, 63-64.
performed as part of this restored Adamic task is in some sense meritorious of the future beatitude. But in my judgment it is difficult to see how speaking of “grace-restores-nature” provides any great advantage over speaking of “grace-perfects-nature.”

I would like to suggest, therefore, a different sort of Reformed response to Thomas’s nature/grace paradigm, one that sets the ideas of nature and natural law in the context of Reformed covenant theology. What follows is a basic sketch, the substance of which I unpack in the subsequent chapters of this book.

First, what about the situation before the fall into sin? For now I will refer not to “nature” and “grace” but to “first creation” and “new creation.” This is not to deny that things have natures or to get hung up on semantics, but there are certain advantages to these terms I will explain below. At the beginning, God made the first creation destined for consummation in the new creation. At the center of this about-to-unfold historical dynamic were human beings, created to live in the first creation but also, through faithful service to God in it, to attain consummation in the new creation where they would rest and reign with God (who himself labored righteously in his work of creation and then entered his state of rest). God made human beings with a nature upright and righteous, though protological and fallible, and in this natural condition and by their natural powers they were fully able to fulfill the task God gave to them and thus to attain the promised reward of the consummated new creation. I avoid speaking here of “supernatural” gifts or gifts of “grace” that God gave to human beings in addition to their natural endowments, because I wish to affirm that the ability to fulfill their divinely established commission in the world was a constitutive gift of the original creation, not a proleptic gift of the eschatological new creation. This is not to say that human beings were on some kind of ontologically level ground with God so as to enable them to earn something from him, but that God as a free gift created human beings in his image, in a covenant relationship (the covenant of creation). As an image-bearer in covenant with God, Adam was naturally enabled to follow God’s archetypal pattern of ruling well in this world and then attaining rest in an eschatological new creation as a just reward. In this context, the (original)

66. Perhaps supporting this observation is the fact that neo-Calvinist writers at times use the traditional Thomistic language and the fact that Thomists sometimes use the preferred neo-Calvinist language. Bavinck, for example, can write: “Grace repairs and perfects nature”; see Reformed Dogmatics, 3:226 (italics added). Long, on the other hand, says that Thomas held nature to be “restored” in grace; see Natura Pura, p. 82.

67. In Bavinck’s words, “there was a merit ex pacto (arising from a covenant), not ex
natural law was a law directing human beings in this image-bearing task of ruling the first creation toward the goal of attaining the new creation.

Putting this in terms of first creation/new creation (instead of nature/grace) helps to make clear that the chief dynamic here is historical (or horizontal), not vertical (which the very language of supernatural perfection suggests, and which Thomas’s use of neo-Platonic metaphysics does not discourage). The first creation/new creation terminology should also make clear that the ultimate eschatological goal is not something wholly other than the original state (some kind of second creation ex nihilo), but its consummation. Thomas, I am confident, would appreciate both of these points. But my decision not to use the terminology of “grace” does get to substantive differences with Thomas, for while Thomas uses “grace” as a way to express the similarities between the way to heavenly beatitude before the fall and the way after the fall, I refrain from using “grace” precisely in order to capture the differences between them. In short, for Thomas human beings could merit the beatific vision through a gift of supernatural grace both before and after the fall; for the project I develop here, human beings before the fall could merit the new creation through the proper use of their natural endowments, while human beings after the fall need a gift of grace to attain the new creation because they cannot merit it in any respect. I return to this last point again shortly.

After the fall, the human history initiated at creation continued, but was diverted from its original straight path toward consummation in the new creation. The dynamic of the revised historical process is twofold: God preserves the original creation (and with it a general human history) and God enacts a plan of salvation that achieves human attainment of the new creation, which was humanity’s original goal. Both aspects of this dynamic may again be understood covenantally: the preservation of the original creation through the covenant with Noah and the attainment of the new creation by a plan of salvation through the covenants of grace. In the postlapsarian context the traditional nature/grace language becomes much more amenable to my project. Grace, indeed, does not destroy nature; (common) grace preserves nature and (saving) grace consummates nature.

First, then, (common) grace preserves nature. One of God’s great works

condigno.” See Reformed Dogmatics, 2:544. As I explain further in Chapter 1, my claims here may help point to a way through traditional debates between the intellectualist and voluntarist traditions about the relationship of natural law to God’s reason and will. I argue in this book that natural law does indeed reflect the very holiness and righteousness of God, but only insofar as God reveals himself through nature in a particular covenant relationship with humanity, into which he freely and willingly enters.
Introduction

after the fall is preservation of the original creation, including human nature, though in fallen and corrupted form. Though this work obviously began immediately upon the fall, God later made a covenant with Noah by which he formally established the terms of his preservative work. By this covenant God bestows common grace upon creation — “common” in that God gives it promiscuously. Human nature still exists, since human beings continue to be image-bearers of God, having reason and will and retaining a continuing responsibility to rule in this world under God’s ultimate authority. But sinful human beings have damaged reason and wounded wills, using their authority in this world for many wicked ends. Their eschatological horizon now points not to a new creation attainable through faithful service to God but to condemnation at the final judgment, which the Noahic covenant has postponed but not canceled. God continues to impart natural law, which is organically continuous with the natural law imparted in the covenant of creation but is now refracted through the Noahic covenant of common grace, in a way fit for a fallen-but-preserved world. It lays upon human beings natural obligations for things that serve to preserve their existence and to promote a limited and penultimate flourishing within this present creation. This natural law also reminds human beings of their accountability before God and preserves a sense of their eschatological orientation, though now it offers no hope of a good outcome.

The second aspect of the post-fall dynamic is that (saving) grace consummates nature. Through the covenants of grace God provides a way of salvation such that human beings attain the original goal, the consummated new creation. This happens, however, not by putting human beings back somewhere on the track upon which Adam originally set out to get there, either in terms of a Thomistic gift of supernatural grace enabling them to do acts meritorious of the beatific vision or in terms of a neo-Calvinist renewed pursuit of the original creation mandate. Rather, by the covenants of grace God forms a new community from among fallen humanity. Its members rest by faith on the Lord Jesus Christ, who personally fulfilled Adam’s original commission by being a perfect image-bearer of God in the present creation and thereby achieved the goal of the new creation in his ascension. Those who believe in him are already justified (as if they themselves had faithfully completed the original human commission) and already adopted as heirs of the new creation, of which they are now citizens. But God also calls believers to pilgrimage for a time in this present world — fallen but preserved under the Noahic covenant of common grace — until the day of Christ’s return, at the consummation, when the new creation will be fully revealed.

During this interim time, these justified participants in the covenants
of grace are to live moral lives that are in many respects unique, in the way they anticipate the glorified life of the new creation. But God also calls them in Christ to continue to respect and obey the natural order preserved by the Noahic covenant, and sanctifies them for more faithful obedience to the natural law.