

“The authoritative *special* revelation in Scripture *commands* that, in certain matters, we rely on and appeal to general revelation.” (Ken Myers)

Discuss this claim with reference to the nature and legitimacy of ‘natural law’ in an evangelical approach to matters of public discourse.

A bold claim

Myers has made a bold claim with striking practical implications for Evangelical Public Theology. As Leithart comments:

“Myers is perhaps overstating his point, but he has written that Scripture *commands* Christians to appeal to general revelation when engaged in matters of common culture. If Myers really means this, it means that quoting Scripture in such circumstances is *sin*; even if he does not really mean it, his goal is clearly to discourage appeals to Scripture or specifically Christian truth claims in cultural engagements with unbelievers.”¹

Myers’ description of the relationship between general and special revelation here requires close scrutiny. The matter is not as straightforward as he suggests.

A biblical case? - “Scripture commands...”

Unfortunately, Myers’ presentation of his case is exegetically thin. His claim is very specific: that “Scripture commands that... we rely on and appeal to general revelation”; but he does not do much to cite the actual commands he might have in mind.

Perhaps the text which looks most like the specific instruction that Myers might be thinking of, operating in practice, is **Proverbs 6:6**, which gives the command: “Go to the ant, O sluggard; consider his ways and be wise.” This certainly qualifies as a command in special revelation to consider a part of general revelation: the sluggard is to observe and learn from the creation. However, it should be noted that this is not an unaided use of

¹ Leithart, p28

reason: the passage itself makes it clear that the warning is against sloth; the ant is to serve as an example of industry. The lesson to be learnt from the ant does not have to be worked out independently: it is explicitly stated as a datum of special revelation. The ant seems to serve as an illustration of what the recipient of the text ought to know from the special revelation given here.

Similarly, in **Genesis 15:5**, God directs Abraham: "'Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.'" Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be.'" Creation is being used in special revelation. General revelation is not communicating some point which is deducible without the special revelation of Scripture. Again, the general revelation merely aids the communication of special revelation, not adding otherwise unavailable content.

Likewise, when Jesus tells his disciples to "consider the lilies" (**Matthew 6:28**), he also goes on to reveal to them the conclusion they are to draw. It is difficult to think that these imperatives prove much about epistemology or public discourse.

Though not exactly fitting Myers' insistence that Scripture commands dependence on general revelation, other texts might be cited as showing the importance of general revelation and implying that it should be relied on and appealed to.

Myers refers to "the case of Sodom and Gomorrah [**Genesis 18-19**], which", he says, "if I read *special revelation* right, were destroyed because they ignored or misread *general revelation*."² However, this requires a certain amount of eisegesis. We know that the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah had some contact with the people of God and it is not clear to what extent they were exposed to special revelation.

According to **Psalms 19**, the creation declares the glory of God. Although the translation of verse 3 is difficult, the psalm seems to affirm general revelation, that is, that the voice of creation is universally heard. However, the Psalm is "to the choirmaster" and belongs

² Myers, p33f

to the cultic life of the covenant people of God. The second half of the Psalm speaks strongly of the perfection of the Law, God's special revelation.

As with Psalm 19, the so-called **nature Psalms** (such as **Psalms 8, 19, 29, 33, 65 and 104**) show the covenant people of God praising Yahweh for his works of creation and providence, about which they have clearly been instructed by the scriptures. As G. C. Berkouwer comments:

“... the revelation of God in his works is a matter of God's self-revelation, and that is not apprehended first of all by scientific investigation, but through faith, as is evident already in the Psalms of Israel. These psalms of praise are not based on scientific investigation; rather the God of salvation is praised in these hymns in all his greatness and glory. In general revelation we are not dealing with an independent source of knowledge; on the contrary, by faith we understand the act of divine revelation in created reality.”³

Or as Frame says:

“God's works in nature are never presented in Scripture as events which are to be interpreted on some “neutral” or nonbiblical criterion of truth. The “nature Psalms” ... are utterances of God's redeemed people, expressing their faith. Furthermore, the Book of Psalms begins by speaking of the righteous man who “meditates on (God's) law day and night.” As students of the Scriptures, the psalmists saw all of life, and indeed all of nature, in the light of God's statutes.”⁴

These Psalms demonstrate in practice something of Calvin's suggestion that the book of God's works in creation is to be read by the spectacles of faith.

³ Berkouwer, *General Revelation*, p289

⁴ Frame, p145

The apostolic preaching is sometimes thought to provide a model in special revelation for appealing to general revelation, which would lend some support to Myers' case.

Acts 14 cites the generosity of God to all people, including the pagans of Lystra, in providence as a witness to God:

“In past generations he [God] allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”
(verses 16-17)

Leithart comments that: “Paul’s sermon [in **Acts 17**] certainly gives Christians a model of freedom in the use of pagan sources and terminology; but his sermon does not lend support to natural law theory as traditionally maintained.”⁵

Frame notes that Paul’s sermons in Acts 14 and 17 are far from being a pure appeal to general revelation and that they are not as positive about natural knowledge of God as is sometimes suggested:

“Even Paul’s addresses to the Gentiles at Lystra and Athens... contain Old Testament allusions (cf. Acts 14:15 with Exod. 20:11; Acts 17:24 with 1 Kings 8:27; Acts 17:25 with Ps 50:9-12; Acts 17:26 with Deut. 32:8)... The Gentiles in these addresses are presented with facts they are assumed to know already – God’s mercies in the rain and sunshine, their own ignorance, the divine immanence – which in their natural state they have failed to acknowledge. Far from affirming their natural state and its would-be autonomous criteria, Paul commands the Gentiles to repent of it. This is not “neutral” apologetics but gospel preaching (Acts 14:15). The conclusion warranted by this preaching is not mere

⁵ Leithart, p18, footnote 46

probability but a certain proclamation of divine judgement and a command to repent.”⁶

In **1 Corinthians 11:14**, Paul argues that “nature (fu,sij) itself” teaches “you that if a man wears long hair it is a disgrace for him.” Peter Leithart⁷ points out that Paul is speaking to Christians who have the mind of Christ, which the apostle has sharply contrasted with worldly wisdom (1 Cor 2:6-16). Leithart argues that the appeal to nature is in the context controlled by special revelation, with Genesis 2 especially prominent. Leithart follows Gordon Fee in arguing that: “by ‘nature’ Paul meant the natural feelings of their contemporary culture”⁸. Leithart thus argues that the text “provides little support for traditional natural law theory.”

The New Testament does not suggest that **conscience** provides a straightforwardly reliable natural reflection of God’s law. Leithart summarises C. A. Pierce conclusion that “conscience in its New Testament usage provides no guidance for future acts. It is not a source of moral norms, but a painful reminder of sin and a call to repentance.”⁹ Conscience can be weak, defiled (1 Cor 8:7) or seared (1 Tim 4:2).

Romans 2:14-15 has been a crucial text in the development of natural law theories, where the interpretation of fu,sij is again significant. The text has often been taken to show that Gentile unbelievers have the law of God written on their hearts by nature. Yet this reading is problematic.

Paul says that these Gentiles “do what the law requires” (v14) and that “the doers of the law will be justified” (v13). The suggestion that some Gentiles will be justified by doing the law goes against the whole thrust of Paul’s argument from 1:18 to 3:20, where he is demonstrating the universal sinfulness and guilt of all mankind, who would all stand condemned were it not for the gospel.

⁶ Frame, p145

⁷ Leithart, pp 14-15, footnote 39

⁸ Citing Fee, *1 Corinthians NICNT* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1987), pp526f

⁹ Leithart, p18, citing Pierce, C. A., *Conscience in the New Testament* (London, SCM Press, 1955)

Many Evangelical commentators have therefore imagined that Paul has introduced a hypothetical case in verses 14 and 15: he describes an empty set of Gentiles who keep the law and grants that if there were any such, they would be justified on that basis.

As Wright comments, this reading “has Paul leading his readers far further up the garden path than the demands of a rhetorical strategy would suggest.”¹⁰

It seems more satisfactory to follow Wright, Gathercole and Cranfield in arguing that the Gentiles in view here are believers. This reading is not novel: although Gathercole concedes that it is “without doubt a minority position” it “has a distinguished heritage”, going back to ‘Ambrosiaster’ and being held by Augustine in his later life and Karl Barth amongst others¹¹. Wright argues that:

“Paul’s view... is that those who are in Christ, who are indwelt by the Spirit, do in fact “do the law,” even though, in the case of Gentiles, they have never heard it.... He will have it both ways; they are not under the Torah, but at the same time they are essentially doing what Torah really wanted.”¹²

Wright does not see *fu,sij* here as an echo of Stoic natural law. He translates the verse: “... for when nations not having Torah by nature do the things of the Torah” and takes “by nature” as modifying “having Torah” rather than “doing the things of the Torah”. The meaning is thus that the Gentiles do not have the Torah by origin and parentage, but fulfil its essential concern.

The reading is consonant with the fact that to have the work of the law written on one’s heart is the product of the New Covenant according to Jer 31:33 (c.f. Jer 32:40; Ez 36:26).

¹⁰ Wright, p441

¹¹ Gathercole, p29

¹² Wright, p441

If this interpretation is granted, then these verses speak not of the unbeliever's natural knowledge of God's law by creation or general revelation but the believer's, by the special work of the Spirit.

Romans 1 is perhaps the most significant text in arguing for unbelievers' knowledge of God by general revelation. Paul asserts that God's "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." (v20).

However, this knowledge of God is suppressed, *catechontwn*; Jewett suggests it captures Paul's sense to say that knowledge of God is held down and kept at arms length, that man keeps the lid on it¹³ (v18).

It is important for the purposes of public engagement with nonbelievers to assess how thorough this rejection of knowledge of God is. Is general revelation totally suppressed or does it remain, offering a point of contact for the gospel and the possibility of limited agreement with unbelievers? Paul's language about how much knowledge of God is retained seems bleak: "they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise they became fools... they exchanged the truth of God for a lie.... God gave them up to a debased mind." (vv21-22, 25, 28).

The result of natural knowledge of God according to this passage is not some kind of humanely ordered society or a minimal moral consensus, for which Myers hopes. Rather, the result of natural knowledge of God is "so they are without excuse." (v20). As far as this text adjudicates on the matter, general revelation here leads only to condemnation, not to a limited cultural reformation.

Leithart's comments are worth quoting at length for they point out effectively how Romans 1 differs from the Natural Law theories it is sometimes thought to support:

¹³ Jewett, p68

“Natural law theory resists the proposition that all men know the one true God. Instead, it tends to assert that all men have some sense that some “supreme being” exists, and know something about the character of this supreme being. This is far less than Paul claims. Paul claims that all men know (in the personal sense; not merely know about) God (the One True God, Father, Son, and Spirit). They may not know Him by Name, but it is He whom they know. Speaking Christianly [that is, in special revelation terms] to an unbeliever is not like speaking Swahili to a Swede; it is like speaking Swedish to an American of Swedish descent who has almost, but not quite, forgotten his native tongue.

“On the other hand, natural law claims too much for the ability of those who are outside of Christ to embrace and put into practice what they know. The fact that men know the moral law does not, for Paul, lead to the conclusion that natural morality is sufficient as far as it goes. On the contrary, because the natural man suppresses and distorts the knowledge he cannot escape, natural morality is ultimately foolishness and darkness.”¹⁴

We must distinguish, then, between the knowledge of God which general revelation might provide and that which sinful man actually acknowledges. General revelation seems only to result in the unbeliever’s culpability, for rejecting the knowledge of God he ought to have received. It is the believer, with the benefit of special revelation and the illumination of the Spirit who is able to profit from general revelation.

“special... general revelation”

Leithart argues that general and special revelation are not as easily disentangled as Myers’ proposal implies. He argues that Natural Law or the use of general revelation requires “rational reflection on human experience and history” but:

¹⁴ Leithart, p19f

“... special revelation is itself a fact of history; indeed, it is a primary fact.... If this truth claim is ignored... one will proceed on at least a working assumption that God, even if He exists, has *not* revealed himself verbally to His creatures. This is not a neutral working assumption; it is, so the Christian believes, simply false and will not infrequently lead to fallacious conclusions. Natural law cannot even properly reflect on human experience and history without considering the meaning and impact of special revelation; if it ignores special revelation, it is not really taking the whole of human history into account. General revelation includes the phenomenon and influence of special revelation. Natural law simply cannot stand on its own.”¹⁵

“in certain matters”

The statement from Myers under discussion does not specify in which matters special revelation requires us to attend to general revelation. It seems from the rest of Myers’ article that he wants to distinguish (1) the general revelation sphere of creation and culture from (2) the special revelation sphere of salvation and the New Creation. However, this division is ultimately unsatisfactory. It is this creation that is being renewed so that God’s people pray that his special revelation Kingdom will come on and his will be done in earth as it is in heaven. Jesus makes special revelation claims over all of creation and it is the church’s task to claim this world and every area of life for its ultimate King (Matthew 28:19f). Myers’ picture of the commonsense reasonable and humane non-Christian will not hold, since Jesus the Logos is the True Man. We can only be properly human and reasonable by union with him¹⁶.

Leithart argues that once one recognises the noetic effects of the fall, it is difficult to tell what contents any Natural Law derived from general revelation alone might have. He says:

¹⁵ Leithart, p22f

¹⁶ Similarly, Leithart p24, objecting to John Courtney Murray’s version of natural law.

“I deny there is a universal consensus of morality, embraced by every human culture in every time and place, which is a product of revelation in creation; I affirm that human cultures adhere to a wide variety of moral codes, many of them incompatible with the moral requirements of Christianity, and that it is impossible to determine whether whatever consensus as does exist is the product of natural or special revelation.”¹⁷

As Leithart asks, even if we could ignore the influence of special revelation, without it, “how does one distinguish between human inclinations that are “natural” and therefore virtuous from human inclinations (such as sado-masochism) that are “erroneous” and base?”¹⁸

“rely on”

Myers’ construal of the relationship between general and special revelation may have implications for the doctrines of the necessity and sufficiency of scripture (2 Timothy 3:16f). Whilst Myers is right that scripture is not an exhaustive guide to every area of life, it seems best to think that it tells us everything we need to know for godliness, rather than merely pointing us in the direction of general revelation for guidance as to what is right in some areas. Matters of creation and culture, such as the right ordering of civil society, are certainly matters of godliness on which 2 Timothy 3:16f would lead us to look to scripture for the guidance we need. Our examination of texts above suggests that there are not texts of scripture which imply that general revelation provides additional information which is not accessible from special revelation.

“appeal to”

Part of Myers’ case is pragmatic: he thinks that in the public square, general revelation is more likely to gain a hearing than special revelation. However, man’s moral blindness

¹⁷ Leithart, p6

¹⁸ Leithart, p21

suggests that the proclamation of the word in the power of the Spirit is an absolute necessity for the transformation of society. The gospel offers a more powerful hope than an appeal to suppressed natural knowledge of God.

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