4. NATURAL THEOLOGY AND THEOLOGY OF NATURE

The Problem in a Nutshell

There was a "Family Circus" cartoon a few years ago where we see part of the family at the Grand Canyon, and one of the children is asking, "*The ranger said the river dug the canyon, Mommy, and you said God did it. Who's right?*" I'm convinced that many of our supposed conflicts with science are simply because we don't have a good answer to this question, and too often we have this childish approach ourselves.

How would you answer? I expect that wise parents would steer their child away from the false dichotomy expressed in the question, instead affirming that both the ranger and the mother are right. This might be expressed by saying that God is in charge of the river, or that the river is a tool God uses.

If we are to give good answers to such questions, we need to consider how we understand God's relationship with nature. Is God in competition with natural explanations, like the childish view in the cartoon? If not, how does God enter the picture? In order to answer these questions, we need to develop a theology of nature.

Natural Theology versus Theology of Nature

We define theology of nature as *attempts to understand the role and character of nature (its meaning, purpose, relationship to God, etc.) from a foundation of Christian theology*.

We distinguish this from something else that some Christians have pursued over the years, which is natural theology. We define natural theology as *attempts to figure out God (or some things about God) by human reason from studying nature*.

These two endeavors are not mutually exclusive, but it is important to understand the distinction. It is largely a matter of direction – a theology of nature starts from a Christian foundation and tries to see nature in that context, while natural theology starts with nature and tries to get to God.

In this chapter, we will start by discussing natural theology, including some criticisms of it. Then we will look at building a theology of nature. Once we have developed key concepts of a theology of nature, we will come back to natural theology and talk about some contexts in which it might be appropriate if pursued responsibly.

Natural Theology from Paley to Today

Natural theology has been around for a long time, and I do not have the time (or the expertise) to review the history here. It is sufficient to start with the most famous example. In 1802, Rev. William Paley (an amateur naturalist) published a book called *Natural Theology*. This sort of thing was common at the time, but for whatever reason Paley became by far the best known. His most famous argument[1] was that if you were in the wilderness and found a watch lying on the ground, you would never think it was natural. You could tell that the watch was designed for a purpose, so therefore there had been a designer. Paley then went on to say, with examples, that living creatures were clearly designed for a purpose, and that this was a proof of God. This sort of argument for the existence of God is known as the *argument from design*.

[1] This argument was not original with Paley; Prof. Ted Davis has pointed out that it was used by Robert Boyle a century earlier.

Paley also argued that the beauty in nature showed us the goodness of God. That didn't work so well even in Paley's day. If you want to argue from nature for God's goodness, what about parasites, and lions tearing apart zebras and all the things in nature that don't seem so good to us?

But the first aspect, the classic argument from design, is not so easy to dismiss. Much of the apparent design Rev. Paley pointed to is well explained by the theory of evolution (leading the anti-religious biologist Richard Dawkins to title one of his books *The Blind Watchmaker*). But some people today say that there are aspects of life that can't be explained that way, some unbridgeable gaps that show evidence of a designer. This is the so-called Intelligent Design movement, which is largely an updated version of Paley's argument from design. There are also design arguments that point to the basic structure of the universe, the fundamental constants of physics, which seem to be incredibly finely tuned to allow life to exist, and people see that as evidence of a designer. We will discuss those modern arguments later.

Possible Justifications for Natural Theology

If you look at the New Testament, there isn't a single time recorded when the Apostles preaching the Gospel use an argument from design. That at least raises the question of whether "natural theology" is something we should be doing at all. I can think of three reasons why natural theology might be appropriate in some circumstances.

First, it can provide common ground in discussions with those outside the faith. Many people have no reason to listen to the Bible, but nature is something common to all.

Second, it can be a first step, getting people to the idea of the existence of God. This may at least partly explain why the Apostles never made these arguments in their preaching, because back then almost nobody was an atheist, everybody believed in a god or gods.

Third, if God has made the creation, shouldn't we at least consider that it might help us learn about God? That doesn't mean natural theology will always work or always be a good idea, but it seems we shouldn't automatically rule it out.

Criticisms of Natural Theology

Some theologians (for example Karl Barth, probably the most noted theologian of the last century) have said that natural theology is simply a bad idea, that its negatives outweigh any of the justifications offered above. So, at this point we should pause to consider some criticisms and dangers of natural theology. I will list five major criticisms, some of which are general while others may apply just to certain versions of natural theology.

The first serious problem should be obvious from the example of Paley. What if somebody does find a natural explanation for the watch, like Darwin explained many of Paley's examples? If people base their faith on the existence of some apparent "design" in nature where God supposedly miraculously intervened, and then another explanation comes along, the foundation of their faith is undermined. So, at a minimum, we must say that it is dangerous and unwise to make arguments from natural theology foundational to the faith.

Second, natural theology tends to put God on the same level as natural causes, as though God is just another competing force within nature, like gravity. That would be a fundamental mistake, because God transcends natural causes, and, while God may act in nature, God's actions are in a different category than the forces of nature. When you put natural mechanisms and God

into competition, you make the mistake of the child in the cartoon: "*The ranger said the river dug the canyon, Mommy, and you said God did it. Who's right?*"

A third potential problem with natural theology is that it can be guilty of elevating science above other ways of knowing, and elevating human reason above revelation. Are we following the science-idolizing lead of the Enlightenment by insisting that God should be scientifically detectable in order to matter? And who are we to think that we can figure out how God might carry out his design?

Fourth, human efforts to figure out God tend to get distorted by sin and lead to idolatry. We see this in Romans 1:18-23.[2] Verse 20, about God's power and divinity being visible in the things he has made, has been used as a justification for natural theology, and there may be some validity to that. But the main point of the passage is about how we are all affected by sin, and while we should be able to learn something about God by looking at stars and sunsets, our darkened human reason takes that and twists it into idolatry as we worship created things and the constructions of our own fallen minds.

Because some people have missed this context and taken Romans 1:20 as an unqualified endorsement of natural theology, it is worth noting another point against that interpretation. After this section of Romans where it talks about how all of us (Gentiles, Jews, everybody) are doomed because of sin, including the idolatry spoken of in Romans 1 when natural theology goes bad, Paul doesn't go back and say "Now that we've seen the problems, let's go back and do natural theology right." Instead,[3] he goes straight to Jesus as the answer to all these problems.

Finally, and perhaps most important, all you get from natural theology is an anonymous Designer, not the God revealed in Jesus. The Designer could just as easily be the god of the Moonies. If somebody is convinced by natural theology, they have gone from being an atheist to a theist, but what does that matter? As the saying (now outdated by inflation) goes, "That and a quarter might buy you a Coke." From a Christian standpoint, what matters is Jesus, and a person who believes in a Designer without Jesus is every bit as lost as an atheist (at that point, one might consider the Designer to be just another idol). Of course, the answer to this criticism is to view the argument from design as a first step, and then go on to Jesus. But too often the argument about the existence of God is treated as an end in itself.

Building a Theology of Nature

We will return to the idea of natural theology, but at this point we need to think about a theology of nature, a Christian perspective on God's creation and how God relates to it. If we have that perspective, I believe we can avoid most of the problems I just mentioned.

To begin a theology of nature, we might talk about God as the creator – the Biblical doctrine of creation. In Chapter 2, we talked about major aspects of that: the creation is contingent (God could have done it any way God wanted, so we have to look at it to learn about it); orderly

[2] *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or four-footed animals or reptiles.*

[3] Starting with Romans 3:21; I owe this insight to Dr. George Murphy.

(so we can expect studying it to be fruitful); good (so it is worth studying); and not divine (so it won't behave differently if the gods are in a different mood).

We start with God as the creator, but is that it? Does God create and then abandon his handiwork? By no means. The Bible tells us that God is intimately involved with his creation at all places and all times. Christian theologians have developed several concepts to describe God's ongoing relationship with his creation; we will discuss four of them here.

The first concept is Transcendence. This means that God is not a part of nature, nor do we identify nature and God as being of the same substance. God is over and above and separate from his creation.

The second concept is Immanence. This means that God is not a distant, absentee God; God is intimately present with his creation at all places and all times. There is no place at all that is away from God's presence.

The third concept is Providence. This means that God works through nature to provide for his creatures, and that nature expresses God's will. Other terms are used for essentially the same concept, so we may talk about the *sovereignty* of God over nature, about God's *governance* of what appear to be natural processes, or about God's *concurrence* or *cooperation* with natural processes as he employs them to accomplish his purposes.

Finally, an important concept is God's Gracious self-limitation. God allows creatures their own integrity, almost always working through his normal governance of nature. This allows us to live in a consistent world, but it also means that we don't typically get obvious evidence of God at work – we don't pick up a rock and see a stamp "Made by God". It might make our apologetics easier if we did get such evidence, but if you look at the humility of Jesus, maybe it makes sense that God is mostly hidden in the workings of nature. Martin Luther once said that nature is a "mask of God." Some theologians use the term *kenosis* to talk about God's self-limitation, which is the Greek word in Philippians 2:7 where it says Jesus *emptied* himself, humbly taking the form of a servant.

Of all these concepts, perhaps the most important part of the theology of nature for our purposes comes mainly from the doctrine of Providence, which allows us to say that "nature" and "God" are not rival explanations. It is wrong to view "things God does" and "things nature does" as two independent categories, because God is also responsible for nature. "Natural" explanations don't compete with God; they describe the way God normally works.

We can be illustrate this point by considering the simple example of rain. I know several atmospheric scientists, and they can give a complete explanation of the natural processes by which rain occurs. At no point in the explanation would they say "And here is where God sticks his finger in and intervenes." Yet, the Bible tells us God is responsible for the rain.[4] What are we to make of this? Is the Bible wrong? Should we crusade against these evil atmospheric scientists for promoting their atheistic theories of weather? If we have a sound Christian theology of nature, this will not be a problem – we can appreciate the natural explanations of the scientists while still affirming that, on some higher level, God through his providential care is still in charge of the rain. We might also consider how the logic of this example works just as well if we replace "rain" by other natural phenomena, such as the formation of stars or the development of living creatures.

[4] For example, Lev. 26:4; Jer. 5:24; Matt. 5:45.

The "God of the Gaps" Error

This example of rain leads to another key concept, a common mistake both inside and outside the church, which is known as the "God of the Gaps" error. We define the "God of the Gaps" error as *the assumption that having a natural explanation of something excludes God from being the creator and sustainer of that something*. That is the error of the person who hears our atmospheric scientists give a natural explanation for rain and concludes that therefore God isn't in charge of the rain, or of the child in the cartoon who thinks that if the river made the canyon, that means God didn't do it.

"God of the Gaps" thinking divides nature into two distinct categories. One category is things we can't explain, gaps in our understanding where we say "that's where God is" (in primitive times, thunder and lightning were gaps). The second category is things where we do have a natural explanation, and therefore God isn't in those places (because of the mistaken idea that only "supernatural" things really "count" as God's work). The result of "God of the Gaps" thinking is that any time science finds a natural explanation for something, one more gap closes up and God gets squeezed closer to nonexistence. This forces Christians who think this way to attack science in order to make room for God.

A Christian theology of nature tells us that we don't need to make room for God, because God isn't just in the gaps, God is the creator and sustainer of the whole fabric of creation, including the things we call "natural." If you have the God of the Gaps perspective, scientific results count as points against God, but if you have a proper view of God's sovereignty, they are just uncovering how God did things. So, if somebody arguing against the faith says that some scientific explanation (whether for rain, or the evolution of life, or anything else within nature) has eliminated God, we need to reject the God-of-the-Gaps assumption behind that. If somebody arguing for the faith says that some scientific explanation has to be false in order for God to truly be our Creator, we need to reject the God-of-the-Gaps assumption behind that. Natural explanations may eliminate the God of the Gaps, but they don't eliminate the Christian God.

The Role of Natural Theology

Now that we have introduced some key elements of a Christian theology of nature, we can return to the concept of "natural theology" and evaluate it in that context. What role, if any, should natural theology play in our thinking as Christians?

A useful way to begin this discussion is to consider how we can know about God. While this is an oversimplification, we can (consistent with Figure 1 in Chapter 1) consider two different ways we might learn about God.

One way we might learn about God is through *Nature*. This is natural theology, trying to gain knowledge of God from the things God has made, and from God's continuing provision for God's creatures.

The other way to learn about God is through *Revelation*. This encompasses God revealing himself in interacting with his chosen people, revealing himself most completely in Jesus, and Scripture bearing witness to that self-revelation in such a way that we also can call it "revelation." All of those aspects are important; sometimes when we hear the word "revelation" our minds go straight to the Bible, but probably our first thought should really be Jesus.

Therefore, when we think about the role of natural theology for Christians, the issue is closely connected to the relative roles of nature and revelation in leading us to God.

The ways in which Christians might approach natural theology can be divided into four categories.[5] I will present these in pairs, so that in each pair we have an extreme, "strong" version that I would claim is not a good approach, and then a more fruitful modified version.

A *Strong Positive* view of natural theology would make it the primary (or only) way to God. This was the dream of the Enlightenment rationalists 200 years ago, deists like Thomas Jefferson who rejected revelation and wanted a universal religion based on nature and reason. It is also seen in people today who marvel at the wonders of nature but never look for a God beyond nature. I hope it is obvious that this is unacceptable from a Christian standpoint, among other things because natural theology has no place for Jesus and therefore can never tell us the things that are most important.

A *Modified Positive* view would consider natural theology as a first step, establishing plausibility for the existence of God. This can be a viable approach for getting some people to consider Jesus, if it is done right.

What do I mean by "done right"? First, we can't lose sight of the fact that natural theology is only a first step, and it is a worthless step unless people continue on to Jesus. If our arguments lead someone to say "I guess I believe there is a Designer," we shouldn't celebrate any more than a baseball team celebrates when somebody reaches first base. It only counts if they get to home plate, if they come to follow Jesus. Second, our arguments should be reasonable. Unfortunately, many popular arguments in the area of biology and evolution are unsound, sometimes to the point of being nonsense. Some of the arguments I mentioned earlier about the fine-tuning of the universe have more validity. Third, we must avoid the "God of the Gaps" error. We may point to something in nature and say "This looks like it could be a sign of God's work," but (and this is a very important but) we can't do it in a way that implies our faith is based on these gaps, that a natural explanation for what we're pointing to would mean God was absent and invalidate our faith. Drawing attention to possible evidence for God in nature can be OK. However, modern natural theology[6] often comes across as saying that these gaps are a theological necessity, that the truth of Christianity depends on them being right about these gaps, and that if they aren't right it means these things weren't designed by God. When that is the message people hear from promoters of natural theology, it is horrid and harmful God-of-the-Gaps theology because it ignores God's sovereignty over nature and it sets up nature and God as competing explanations.

A *Strong Negative* view would reject all natural theology. This was the position of Karl Barth. Barth emphasized that God is so far above us that we can't know him except as God chooses to reveal himself, so that human attempts to figure out God just lead to idolatry. While Barth certainly has a point about the danger of fallen humans trying to figure out God, it seems to me that total rejection goes too far. We can also think of nature as a revelation from God, and if God is the creator and sustainer of nature, it can't be totally irrelevant to our faith.

A *Modified Negative* view only rejects independent natural theology – natural theology done by itself with no contact with revelation. Instead, we can let revelation provide the context for interpreting nature. Barth had it right that we humans will just construct idols if left to ourselves. However, as Christians we are not left to ourselves – we have God's revelation (most completely in Jesus), and that foundation can help us interpret nature properly. For example, all the suffering and death in nature is a problem for independent natural theology. But, in the

[5] A similar categorization appears in Dr. George Murphy's book *The Cosmos in the Light of the Cross* (see Bibliography).

[6] I am thinking particularly of the "Intelligent Design" movement, discussed further in Chapter 5.

context of revelation, it sheds light on the subject that God, in Jesus, suffers with us, and even died for us. Another example is the way God seems to be hidden in nature for the most part – that is a problem for independent natural theology, but if we see God's self-sacrifice and self-limitation in Jesus, God's self-limitation with regard to his creation makes more sense.

Points to Remember

We have covered a lot of ground in this Chapter, so let me close by reviewing the key points that arise from a Christian theology of nature. Perhaps the most important thing to understand is that nature and God are not rival explanations. We shouldn't think of natural processes as being in competition with God, but rather as tools that God uses. Closely related, we must avoid the "God of the Gaps" error. If we hear some atheist saying that some scientific explanation (rain or evolution or whatever) eliminates God, or if we hear some Christian saying that the scientific explanation must be false in order for Christianity to be true, they're making the God of the Gaps error, and we need to recognize and reject that bad theology. We should be leery of independent natural theology that tries to stand on its own, but natural theology that has a sound theology of nature behind it, if it's done responsibly, can have a legitimate role in defending and arguing for our faith. If we engage in such arguments, it is essential to remember what it is we are really arguing for – it ultimately has to be about Jesus.

Bibliography for Chapter 4

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