GOD’S BRIDLE: JOHN CALVIN’S APPLICATION OF NATURAL LAW

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ABSTRACT

The recent resurgence in natural law thinking has not attacked many self-consciously Protestant thinkers. This state of affairs may have several causes but one may be the opposition or at least indifference to the concept of natural law among modern Protestant theologians, specifically from the Reformed-Calvinistic tradition. Such opposition to use of the tool of natural law is, however, inconsistent with the traditional founder of Reformed theology, John Calvin.

Calvin specifically recognized natural law as a tool of God’s common grace and made use of it when describing the proper role of civil government. I justify this thesis by comparing Calvin to two contemporary natural law theorists, Russell Hittinger and J. Budziszewski. While these two writers emphasize different aspects of the natural law tradition, we can conclude that Calvin would have substantially agreed with their foundational analysis and use of natural law.

While many contemporary legal writers contest the existence and utility of natural law, we see in Calvin and writers like Hittinger and Budziszewski a foundation that should be useful to both Catholic and Protestant writers who wish to challenge positivism, consequentialism, and other common approaches that reject any appeal to a transcendent moral order to evaluate the law.

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