Educational Materials for the Protestant Reformers

INTRODUCTION TO
THE PROTESTANT REFORMERS AND NATURAL LAW

Protestant Christianity strongly influenced the development of the political and constitutional history of
the United States, from the nation’s very beginnings in colonial times up to the great civil rights
movements of the twentieth century. Protestant Christians like Martin Luther King, Jr., have even invoked
natural law to defend justice in the public square. As Dr. Charles points out, however, many Protestants
today consciously reject the natural law tradition because it admits that humanity can know the
universal moral law without a special revelation from God. Dr. Charles devotes his essay to showing that
in fact the founders of the Protestant movement—Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, John Calvin, and
Huldreich Zwingli—firmly asserted the existence of a law of nature, knowable by reason without the gift
of faith. By and large, he shows, the Reformers were in continuity with the natural law tradition that
preceded them and largely agreed with Catholics on this point. Charles goes into greater depth about
the distinctions among the Reformers in their teaching about the law of nature, or as they also called it,
following St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans, “the law written on the heart.”

Biographies of the Protestant Reformers

1. Martin Luther
2. Philipp Melanchthon
3. Huldreich Zwingli
4. John Calvin

MARTIN LUTHER (b. Nov. 10, 1483—d. Feb. 18, 1546)

Martin Luther was a German Catholic priest and monk who in the early sixteenth century began the
Christian movement known as the Protestant Reformation. He believed, among other things, that: the
Bible is the only source of authority in Christianity (to the exclusion of any authority claimed by past or
present teachings of popes and bishops); God’s grace accepted by faith is the only agent in a man’s
salvation—the individual believer contributes nothing; and there is no difference within Christianity
between laity or clergy and therefore no justification for a visible hierarchy of popes, bishops, and
priests. At the core of his message was a joyful and childlike trust in God’s mercy. Luther called this
abiding trust in God “Christian freedom.” The Reformation resulted in the division of western Christianity
between Roman Catholicism (which had previously been the religion of all of Europe) and various
Protestant groups, primary among them Lutherans (followers of Luther himself), Calvinists (followers of
John Calvin), Anglicans (the Church of England), and the Anabaptists.

Luther was born in the town of Eisleben in what is now Northeast Germany (the former East Germany)
between Magdeburg and Leipzig. His father was a successful local businessman. He received a typical
Catholic religious education as a boy and in adolescence was sent to a school run by the Brethren of the
Common Life, a lay movement that emphasized personal piety. (Thomas a Kempis, author of the
famous Imitation of Christ, had been associated with this movement during his life.) Luther obtained a
bachelor’s degree in the liberal arts in 1502 and three years later a master’s degree, both from the
University of Erfurt. He was immersed in medieval scholastic philosophy, and claimed to have been especially influenced by Aristotle and William of Ockham.

In 1505 Luther entered a monastery of the Order of the Hermits of St. Augustine (the Augustinians), explaining his decision by saying that during a violent thunderstorm, he had made a vow to become a monk if God allowed him to survive the storm. (Some speculate that this was an excuse he made to placate his disapproving father—vows made under duress were not binding.) Life in the monastery he entered was relatively austere and typical of monastic life until then, revolving around the recitation of the Psalms, the celebration of the Mass, and work. Luther was ordained a priest in the order in 1507. Also in 1507 he began advanced studies in theology and was transferred to the Augustinian monastery at Wittenburg to study at the university there.

In late 1510 and early 1511 he traveled to Rome at the request of his order to appeal a decision of the pope. His appeal failed, and he came away with a negative impression of Rome in general. He found it to be a rather unspiritual place for being the center of the Catholic Church.

In 1512, Luther received his doctorate in theology and became a professor of biblical studies at Wittenburg. He rose in the ranks of leadership at his monastery and in the Augustinian order, and began to publish theological writings, including criticisms of scholastic theology.

Then in 1517, a Dominican friar named Johann Tetzel came to Wittenburg and allegedly preached that people who purchased a letter of indulgence from him would receive forgiveness of their sins. To remedy this abuse, Luther proposed an academic debate at the university on the nature of indulgences. He circulated a list of theses for discussion, the famous Ninety-Five Theses. He sent a copy of the document to Archbishop Albert of Mainz (the bishop to whom Tetzel was subject) and asked that the Archbishop stop Tetzel from preaching. Although the day on which Luther published these Theses is now taken to be the inception of the Reformation, at the time this was not Luther's intention (even though some of the theses referred to the pope rather harshly). Nevertheless, the archbishop requested that the papal curia in Rome open a formal inquiry into the orthodoxy of the Theses.

In 1518, Luther was called to Rome, but Frederick III, the Duke of Saxony (where Luther lived), convinced Rome to examine Luther instead in Augsburg at the periodic meeting or “Diet” of the emperor and princes of the Holy Roman Empire. (The Empire was the confederation of German-speaking principalities in central Europe.) There the Dominican Thomist Cardinal Cajetan examined Luther for three days and then advised Luther to recant his positions. Luther instead fled back to Wittenburg. By the end of 1518 he had become firmly committed to the position that formed the core of Protestantism: that grace alone, accepted by faith, reconciles man to God, and that humans contribute nothing to their salvation.

Although Luther tried to keep to himself, the Theses sparked widespread debates throughout Germany that drew attention to him and increased his reputation as a heretic. In 1520 Pope Leo X issued a decree that condemned certain opinions of Luther’s and gave him one last chance to recant. Luther refused, called the pope the antichrist, and burned the decree in public. In 1521 the pope formally excommunicated Luther and declared him to be a heretic.

Because of recent policies adopted by Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, and because of widespread support for Luther, he was not put to death immediately. Rather he was given an audience before the assembled German princes at their Diet in the city of Worms in 1521. There Luther acknowledged the writings that were his, but refused to recant them, reportedly saying, “Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.”

Luther left Worms, and Charles V declared Luther and his followers to be outlaws and ordered his writings to be burned. But not all the German princes agreed with the Emperor’s action, especially Frederick, the Duke of Saxony, who took Luther in secret to his castle in Wartburg. There Luther translated the New Testament into the German vernacular. This was one of his most important feats,
and it profoundly affected the development of the German language and the emergence of national European languages in general.

Meanwhile popular anger at Luther’s treatment stirred up widespread support for reform of the Catholic Church in Germany. By the time Luther re-emerged in Wittenburg in 1522, law and order had begun to break down. Luther himself thought reform should happen slowly, and he was able to calm and direct the reform movement in Wittenburg accordingly. But with the emergence of other reformers in 1523 and the shift of the Reformation out of theological discussion and into the realm of politics, Luther was no longer as important as he had been, even though he still remained influential.

In 1524, German peasants, inspired partly by Luther but also by economic and political complaints, rose up in rebellion. The uprising spread throughout central Germany and became known as the Peasants’ War. Luther at times supported the peasants and at other times denounced them. It was in response to this crisis that he began to teach that the object of reform should be more matters of religion and not public life, thus questioning the medieval view that Christianity should suffuse all of society, not just the Church. In the end the peasants became alienated from him.

In the mid-1520s he engaged in a literary debate with the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus about whether human beings were free to contribute to their salvation. In 1527 Luther parted sharply with the Swiss reformer Huldrych Zwingli, because the latter denied the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. At a mostly failed attempt at reconciliation in 1529, Luther took out a piece of chalk and wrote out on a table the Latin words of institution from the Gospel, “Hoc est corpus meum” (“This is my body”).

In 1525 Luther married Katherine of Bora, a former nun who had fled her convent with eight other nuns. By that time, Luther himself was the only resident left of the former Augustinian monastery in Wittenburg. (The other monks had all married or fled to Catholic parts of the Empire.) He married Katherine because she was alone and without support; because he had already opined that marriage was honorable and that celibacy should not be insisted on for priests; and because he believed that the end of the world was at hand, based on evidence like the Peasants’ War. Luther and Katherine had five children, one of whom died young; they had a very affectionate marriage and family life in general.

In 1530 Charles V convened a Diet at Augsburg to address the persisting religious divisions in the empire, but Luther could not attend on account of his still being an outlaw. His student Philipp Melanchthon attended instead, presenting the Augsburg Confession as a summary of Protestant beliefs.

Luther was little involved in the development of Protestantism after his initial controversy with Rome. He continued to teach at Wittenburg’s university, despite poor health. In 1546, during a stay at Eisleben, the town of his birth, he died at age 62, and was later buried at the Castle Church in Wittenburg.

Bibliography


PHILIPP MELANCTHON (b. Feb. 15, 1497—d. April 19, 1560)

Philipp Melanchthon (originally Philipp Schwartzerd) was a humanist, a theologian, and a disciple and collaborator of Martin Luther, founder of the early 16th-century Christian movement in Germany known as the Protestant Reformation.

Melanchthon was born in 1497 in the town of Bretten in the Palatinate region of the German-speaking Holy Roman Empire. (Bretten lies in the southwestern part of modern Germany, east of the city of Karlsruhe.) Philipp’s father died when he was about 11 years old.

His first tutor was his great-uncle, a famous humanist through whom Philipp developed a deep love for the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans. When he went to a school focused on humanist training, he changed his last name from Schwartzerd (meaning “black earth”) to its Greek equivalent, Melanchthon.

In 1511 he earned a bachelor’s degree from the University of Heidelberg, and in 1514 he earned a master’s from Tübingen. His studies focused on Scholasticism (the philosophy of the medieval universities); the rhetoric of the Dutch humanist Rodolphus Agricola; the nominalist philosophy of William of Ockham and John of Wesel; the Bible; and Greek and Latin literature. After graduating he published six books, including a Greek grammar that went through several editions. The Dutch humanist Erasmus praised his ability, and his fame even reached England.

In 1518 Melanchthon accepted a position at the University of Wittenburg as its first professor of Greek. There he began to call for a revival of theology and society through the study of ancient Latin, Greek, and Christian authors. He published seven more books and earned a bachelor’s degree in theology. In 1520 he married Katherine Krapp, with whom he eventually had four children.

At Wittenburg, Melanchthon quickly established a deep friendship with Martin Luther, who was a professor there. Melanchthon became Luther’s chief defender during the initial controversy that sparked the Reformation, even after the Holy Roman Emperor ordered Luther’s supporters to be killed. In his later years Melanchthon’s own views diverged slightly from Luther’s: his view on the Eucharist eventually came to match that of John Calvin; he came to believe that individuals were in part freely responsible for accepting or rejecting salvation (Luther denied free will altogether in salvation); and although he accepted the primacy of faith from which good works flow, he said such works were a “necessary” consequence. Unlike Luther, he stressed that individuals had to be held accountable to law to bring them to repentance.

With Luther’s encouragement, Melanchthon lectured on Paul’s Letter to the Romans, and in 1521, he published the Locci communes, the first systematic presentation of the thought of the Reformation. By 1525 the Locci communes had gone through 18 editions in the original Latin and was being printed in German also. Luther praised it as equal to Scripture. Years later, the University of Cambridge in England made it required reading, and Queen Elizabeth I nearly memorized it.

In 1528 Melanchthon published Unterricht der Visitatoren, a set of instructions that stated the beliefs of the Reform movement and set forth an elementary school curriculum. The curriculum was soon enacted into law in Saxony, making Melanchthon the creator of the first public school system. His educational ideas spread throughout Germany through his writings and his consultations with various cities. He helped to found the universities of Königsberg, Jena, and Marburg, and reformed many others. So important was his influence on German-speaking education that he became known as Praeceptor Germaniae, “the Teacher of Germany.”

Melanchthon continued to grow in importance during the early negotiations between the Reform movement and the Catholic princes of the Empire. He showed himself to be a skilled negotiator; the
Catholics respected him most among all the Reformers. Luther himself was prevented from taking part in negotiations because he was outlawed from the Catholic parts of the Empire under pain of death. Melanchthon attended the Diet of Speyer in 1529. (A “Diet” was a periodic meeting of the Empire’s princes to conduct affairs of state.) There the princes who sympathized with Luther lodged a formal protest against the Catholic majority, from which the term “Protestant” arose. In 1530, at the negotiations of the Diet of Augsburg, Melanchthon was the leading representative of the Reformation. For that meeting he prepared the Augsburg Confession, one of the first formal summaries of Protestant beliefs. That document, along with his later Apology of the Confession of Augsburg (1531) and his Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, became enduring, authoritative statements of Lutheran beliefs.

Although Melanchthon did not compromise on points of disagreement with Catholics, many Protestants severely criticized him for being too conciliatory. After years of work trying to resolve divisions between Protestants and Catholics, and among Protestants, Melanchthon died in 1560 and was buried in Wittenburg next to Martin Luther.

Bibliography


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**HULDREICH ZWINGLI (b. Jan. 1, 1484—d. Oct. 11, 1531)**

Huldreich (also spelled Huldrych or Ulrich) Zwingli was the leading figure of the Swiss Protestant Reformation. The Reformation in general was the Christian reform movement started by Martin Luther in German-speaking Europe (the Holy Roman Empire) in the early sixteenth century. Like Luther, Zwingli believed that the Bible was the sole authority for determining Christian belief and practice; though he applied the Bible more rigorously and to more aspects of Christian life than Luther did. He also downplayed the gravity of original sin, denied that the sacraments conveyed grace to the soul, and was on the whole more intellectual in his approach to theology.

Zwingli’s father was a free peasant, one of his uncles was an abbot, and another was a diocesan priest. He was born in Wildhaus, now a village in eastern Switzerland, near the border with Liechtenstein. He acquired a love for music and for Latin and Greek literature in his youth. At the advice of his father and uncle he turned down an offer to join the Dominicans and attended university at Vienna, from which he graduated in 1504. Afterward he taught, read theology, attended lectures of an early proponent of Church reform, and was ordained a priest in 1506.

At his first assignment he discharged his duties as pastor, learned Greek and Hebrew, studied the Church Fathers in depth, and took up a correspondence with Erasmus. He served as a military chaplain for a time, then in 1516 moved to a parish in Einsiedeln (near Zurich). Einsiedeln was home to a
long-standing, popular Marian shrine and a major abbey. Zwingli took full advantage of the opportunity to preach to the shrine’s pilgrims and to deepen his studies at the abbey’s rich library. He later identified this period as the beginning of his doctrinal evolution. Very soon he began to preach for reform, first only against abuses in the Church, not on matters of doctrine.

In 1518 he was appointed to a position at the important Grossmünster church at Zurich that gave him more chances for preaching on the New Testament to large audiences. He became more spiritual and theological in his outlook after surviving an outbreak of the plague in 1519. In 1520 he began to preach more boldly about what he thought was the true meaning of the Bible, instigating rebellions against fasting and priestly celibacy that inaugurated the Swiss Reformation in 1522. In Oetenbach, with the authorization of his bishop, he continued to preach based on his view of the supreme authority of scripture.

In 1523, Zwingli published a set of radical proposals for reform that became adopted by most of the clergy in and around Zurich. Priestly celibacy was abandoned; the cathedral school was transformed into a Reformed seminary; images and the use of organs were forbidden in churches; houses of monks and nuns were disbanded; and the Mass was replaced with a simple communion service. Zwingli himself publicly married Anna Reinhard in 1524. His reforms quickly spread to Bern and Basel, while other areas of Switzerland resisted. Together Zurich, Basel, and Bern formed a political alliance.

In 1525 an extremist Anabaptist group arose in Zurich that wanted to push Zwingli’s reforms even further, by abolishing tithes, infant baptism, and any connection between the church and the state. Zwingli opposed these groups in writing, and the council of Zurich had the group’s leaders executed after they refused to recant. Around the same time Zwingli parted sharply with Martin Luther on the question of the Eucharist. Although both agreed that the Eucharist was not substantially different from bread and wine, Luther believed that in some way Christ was truly present in it, according to the words of Christ in scripture: “This is my body.” Zwingli argued that Christ’s use of the word “is” meant “signifies.” An attempt at reconciliation in 1529 failed. Luther refused to shake Zwingli’s hand even though on other points they did agree. This division was reflected at the meeting of the princes of the Holy Roman Empire—called a Diet—at Augsburg, in 1530. There Zwingli represented one of three distinct Reformed groups against the Catholic princes.

Meanwhile the Catholic cantons of Switzerland were mobilizing to resist the Reformed ones. Zwingli reached out to Venice and France—who were hostile to the Empire—for support for the Swiss reformed cause. When this effort failed, in 1531 Zwingli proposed attacking the Catholic cantons, but the Reformed alliance instead imposed economic sanctions. These provoked the Catholics to attack, resulting in fighting near the city of Kappel. There Zwingli died in battle while serving as a chaplain.

Bibliography

JOHN CALVIN (b. July 10, 1509—d. May 27, 1564)

John (French “Jean”) Calvin (sometimes “Cauvin”), a theologian, was the leading French-speaking Protestant Reformer and the most important Protestant leader among the second generation of the Protestant Reformation (that is, among those who came of age after the Reformation had already begun).

Calvin was born in 1509 to parents of the middle class (neither peasants nor nobility) in a family of five sons. They lived in the town of Noyon in Picardy, France. His father was a notary for the local bishop, and his mother was very pious. His father sent him to the University of Paris in 1523 to study for the priesthood. Calvin ultimately ended up at the College de Montaigu (a part of the University). But in 1528 Calvin stopped pursuing the priesthood, left Paris, and went to law school in Orleans and Bourges. (Incidentally, Calvin left the College de Montaigu just as Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, the leading religious order of the Catholic Counter-Reformation, was arriving there to study.)

Around 1532 Calvin returned to Paris and became deeply influenced by the reforming spirit of Renaissance humanism. He learned Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and took up a serious study of the Bible. In 1533, as the French government was becoming less tolerant toward humanism and other reform movements, Calvin left Paris for Basel, Switzerland.

Around this time he experienced a “sudden conversion” (his words) in the direction of Protestantism. Previously he seemed to have been little influenced by the Reformation, which had by this time been going on in Germany for over 15 years. Not long afterward, in 1536, at the age of twenty-seven, he published the first edition of his magnum opus, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, perhaps the most important and systematic single statement of Protestant beliefs during the Reformation. The first printing sold out quickly, and for the second printing in 1539 Calvin revised and expanded the work substantially, as he did several times thereafter for subsequent editions. At first *The Institutes* was published only in Latin; French editions came out after several years. The final Latin edition came out in 1559 and the final French edition came out in 1560.

In 1555 Calvin’s vision of Christianity became firmly established in Geneva. He could then devote his attention to the concerns of Protestantism across Europe. He maintained an extensive correspondence and completed commentaries on all but one book of the New Testament (Revelation) and on most of the Old Testament. Moreover, he took on a demanding set of pastoral responsibilities in the city. He died in Geneva in 1564 at the age of fifty-four and was buried, by his will, in an unmarked grave, to prevent
idolatry toward his remains.

Calvin’s thought gave rise to the whole branch of Protestantism identified by the adjective “Reformed” or simply “Calvinist.” Its variants include the Reformed churches of France, Germany, Scotland, and the Netherlands; the Puritans in England; and the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Unitarians of the English North American Colonies, later the United States. He had a strong influence on modernity’s notions of Christianity, religion in general, and political theory. Although some have characterized Calvinism as heartless, severe, and abstract, even recent secular scholarship has recognized that the religion of Calvin himself is quite humane. Calvin tried to lead believers to experience the love and mercy of God, which God wondrously offers to human beings in spite of their sinfulness. He encouraged Christians to order their day-to-day lives and the world around them toward God by steady, persevering effort, all the while depending entirely on the grace of God in matters of salvation and the spiritual life. He perhaps leaned toward severity in places only for rhetorical purposes, in order to spur people to reject sin and be faithful to God.

Bibliography


http://www.iep.utm.edu/calvin/
antinomian because they interpret Paul of Tarsus’s Letter to the Romans to say that Christians do not need law because they have the gift of God’s own life (grace) to guide them. Other Christians interpret the Letter to the Romans to say that Christians have no need only of the sacrificial rituals and minor legal decrees prescribed in the Law of Moses, whereas the Ten Commandments of the Law of Moses remain in force. See also LAW OF MOSES, ROM.

Aristotelian philosophy: The school of philosophy founded on the thought of Aristotle, the fourth-century-B.C. Greek philosopher and disciple of Plato. Much of Aristotle’s ethical thinking is foundational for the natural law ethical tradition. See Michael Pakaluk’s essay on natural law in the thought of Aristotle.

Augsburg Confession, The: The earliest summary of the beliefs of the followers of Martin Luther; it was written with significant input from Philip Melanchthon. It defended the Lutheran princes of Germany, addressing the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V at the Diet of Augsburg in 1530 (the “diet” was the periodic gathering of all the princes in the Holy Roman Empire to discuss affairs of state). The Lutherans wanted to show that their beliefs were entirely compatible with Roman Catholicism and that they sought only to correct what they saw as abuses within the Catholic Church.

Christian: Of or belonging to Christianity, the group of all people who believe that Jesus of Nazareth, whom they call Christ (Greek for the “anointed” of God, the “Messiah” of the Jewish religion), and who was a Jewish resident of the Roman province of Palestine in the first century, was truly God and truly a human being, conceived and born of Mary of Nazareth through the special intervention of God—whom Christ called his Father—without the normal cooperation of a biological father. Christians further believe that Christ redeemed the human race from sin (that is, offense to God by committing evil) by his crucifixion and death; rose from the dead; ascended into heaven; gave his followers a share in God’s inner life by sending the Holy Spirit; will return at the end of time; and will bring his followers into eternal happiness with God in heaven in a resurrected existence like the one he now enjoys. Beyond these basic beliefs different groups of Christians vary in what they believe. See also PROTESTANTISM and ROMAN CATHOLIC.

conscience: The power that all human beings have to judge how to act morally in the particular situations in which they find themselves. Christians generally hold that conscience receives its knowledge of moral principles from innate knowledge of the law of nature and the help of special revelation from God, such as the Ten Commandments.

covenant: a solemn agreement between two parties in which the parties give their very selves to each other. Covenants play central roles in the Bible, such as the covenant that Moses mediated between God and the Israileites and the covenant that Christians believe Jesus of Nazareth mediated between God and the human race by his life, death, and resurrection.

divine sovereignty: God’s supreme rule over all of his creation. The Reformer John Calvin made special use of this phrase to emphasize that God commands all aspects of creation, even to the point that human beings do not have free will.

ecclesiastical: A term used by Christians meaning related to a church, that is, to a community of people who share a set of religious beliefs and way of life. From the Greek word “ecclesia” meaning “assembly” or “congregation.” In the Reformation Christians debated about what the nature of the church was as Jesus intended, especially whether it required the leadership of ordained bishops in union with the bishop of Rome (the pope) as had been the case in the Roman Catholic Church. See also PROTESTANTISM, ROMAN CATHOLIC.

Elector of Saxony, The: One of the more important princes of the confederation of German-speaking principalities known as the Holy Roman Empire. The Elector of Saxony during the time of Martin Luther was one of Luther’s most important political supporters. The prince of Saxony was called “Elector” because he was one of the seven princes who elected the new emperor upon the resignation or death of
the previous emperor.

**Gospel, The:** The message of the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Literally “good news” or “good message.” Also any of the four books of the Bible that contain accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus, attributed to two of Jesus’ Apostles (Matthew and John) and two close disciples of the Apostles (Luke and Mark).

**human depravity:** The wickedness of humanity on account of sin. The Reformer John Calvin made special use of this phrase to teach that sin so ravaged man that there is almost nothing good in him, even though the image of God in man and his conscience are not totally destroyed. Because of his depravity, man is utterly dependent on God. In this view God’s mercy in saving human beings is magnified because of how undeserving and weak human beings are.

**justification:** The process of being made just or righteous. In Christian theology, to be justified is to be forgiven of one’s sins by God, so as to be acceptable to God, to live in his presence more deeply in this life, and to enter heaven upon one’s death. For the Protestant Reformers, justification is “forensic,” that is, it is only God’s declaration that the believer is forgiven and has no necessary connection to any act of the believer or to the interior state of his soul. For Catholics, justification is only the first step—though a necessary and decisive one—in the process of sanctification, or becoming holy, in which the believer himself is interiorly transformed by grace (the gift of God). For Catholics justification occurs on both an eternal level (forgiveness of the punishment of hell) and on an earthly or “temporal” level. God’s grace alone can forgive the eternal punishment due to sin—hell—but there still remain non-eternal aspects to sin (such as the tendency to sin, to which sinful acts give rise) that can only be forgiven if the believer—cooperating with grace—also engages in virtuous acts of love of God, love of one’s neighbor, and self-denial. If one dies and has received forgiveness from hell but not from the temporal punishment of sins, Catholics believe that one’s soul must spend a finite time in a state called Purgatory before being admitted to the state of eternal bliss with God called Heaven.

**Law of Love, The:** A combination of two elements of the Law of Moses that, according to Jesus of Nazareth, summarize that whole Law: to love God with all one’s heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself. See also LAW OF MOSES.

**Law of Moses, The:** The set of commands that the religions of Judaism and Christianity believe that God gave to the Israelites through inspirations to a man named Moses. (The Israelites were the descendants of a nomad named Israel who lived at some time between 2000 and 1500 B.C. in the Fertile Crescent.) Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt around 1500 B.C. and formulated the laws that united the Israelites into a nation called Israel. Paramount among these commands are the so-called Ten Commandments that identify the ten gravest moral obligations, such as to worship only the true God, to honor one’s parents, not to kill, not to steal, not to commit adultery, not to lie, and not to wish to steal or commit adultery. Christian natural law thinkers generally hold that the Ten Commandments are in fact the natural law and are therefore knowable to reason regardless of whether one believes that the Ten Commandments come from God. See also ABRAHAM.

**magisterial:** Of the highest authority. The “magisterial Reformers” were the original theologians of Protestantism, and therefore the most authoritative, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin.

**Mosaic Law:** See LAW OF MOSES.

**normativity:** the state of being normative, that is, establishing a norm or standard.

**paedagogical (OR pedagogical):** related to the science of teaching, or having the quality of being instructive.

**Pauline:** Related to the teachings of Paul of Tarsus, one of the earliest preachers of Christianity. See also ROM.
Pelagian: Of or related to the followers of Pelagius, a late fourth- and early fifth-century monk originally from the British Isles. Pelagius denied that all human beings were born with the sin of the first man (Adam) on their souls. He said that some people never sin, and that sin does not wound the will and incline it to sin further. He further taught that human beings must earn forgiveness of their sins by some effort that comes entirely from themselves and not from God. The bishop Augustine of Hippo famously argued against Pelagius to say that all human beings are born with sin on their souls; that the help or “grace” of God that Christ’s death earned was necessary to forgive sin, heal the will, and perform any completely good deed; and that grace is entirely an unearned gift from God, even though in important respects man must still cooperate with grace in a way that reason can only partially understand. Augustine’s position was that which the Catholic Church adopted. Martin Luther and other Reformers thought that much of the practice and teaching of Catholicism in their day had become infected with Pelagianism. See also CHRISTIAN, PROTESTANTISM, and ROMAN CATHOLICISM.

Protestantism: The Christian religious movement begun by Martin Luther in 16th-century Germany and developed further by John Calvin and others during the period called the Reformation. Protestantism is often divided according to denominations that adhere to particular theologians’ understandings of Christian belief. Some of the larger variants include Lutheranism, Presbyterianism, and Anglicanism. Protestantism derives its name from those princes of the Holy Roman Empire that “protested” the decision of the other princes and the Emperor, Charles V, to condemn Luther. Despite Luther’s original intent merely to reform the excesses he perceived in the Catholicism of his day, the movement became separated from the Catholic Church in the greatest cleavage of European Christianity in history, which persists to this day. The subsequent division between Catholics and Protestants sparked more than a century of warfare among the European states that ended with the Peace of Westphalia. Although Protestant denominations often vary considerably in their beliefs, they generally share belief in the inerrancy of the Bible as the inspired Word of God; sola scriptura or the sufficiency of the Bible alone to convey God’s special revelation to mankind (without the need for any tradition or interpreting authority such as the pope and bishops of the Catholic Church); and sola fide or the sufficiency of faith in Jesus Christ to save people from their sins in all respects, such that the efforts of the believer to cooperate with God’s work of making him holy are not as important as they are thought to be in Catholicism. Some Protestants think, as Luther did, that human beings can do and think nothing that is true or good without God’s supernatural intervention. See also CHRISTIAN, ROMAN CATHOLIC.

providence: The word Christians use for God’s care for (literally “looking out for” in Latin) all of his creation, especially for those who follow his law.

Radical Reformers, The: Those who claimed to follow in the spirit of Martin Luther and the magisterial Reformers but who, unlike them, rejected infant baptism, participation in military service, holding public office, and the cooperation between church and state. They also often believed that the end of the world was imminent. The more infamous Radical Reformers encouraged disobedience to political authority. These created great political and social instability to the point of warfare, including a widespread uprising in Germany called the “Peasant Revolt” or “Peasants’ War” (1525–26, supported by Thomas Muentzer) and the secession of the city of Muenster as the independent “Kingdom of Muenster” (1534–35, ruled by John of Leiden). The Radical Reformers came under severe condemnation from Luther and others. The most prominent group among the Radical Reformers were the Anabaptists, who included not only the more violent movements but also peaceful groups like the Mennonites (led by Menno Simons). See also ANABAPTIST, MAGISTERIAL.

Reformation, The: The sixteenth-century European religious movement to reform Christianity. It produced the Christian denominations grouped under the heading Protestantism. See also PROTESTANTISM.

Reformers, The: The leaders of the Protestant Reformation. Primary among these are Martin Luther, Philip Melanchthon, John Calvin, and Huldreich Zwingli. See also PROTESTANTISM.
Rom.: Abbreviation for the Letter to the Romans of Paul, a Jew born in Tarsus in modern-day Turkey in the first century A.D. When he was about thirty he became a Christian in a sudden, dramatic conversion and led many of the first efforts to spread Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. He wrote letters to the churches he founded or intended to visit, in which he gave instructions on the dogmatic and moral teachings of Christianity. So foundational were his formulations of Christian belief in those letters that the early Christians preserved many of them, eventually judged them to have been specially inspired by God, and incorporated them into the Bible among the books written after the end of the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth (these books are called the New Testament). Debates about the meaning of the Letter to the Romans were central to the theological controversies of the Reformation, owing perhaps to the fact that it is Paul’s longest and most systematic letter, and that it deals with such fundamental questions. The Letter to the Romans also contains one of the clearest assertions in the Bible that all human beings, whether they know the true God or not, know the fundamental precepts of the natural law, or as Paul calls it “the law written on the heart.”

Roman Catholic: Of or belonging to the Roman Catholic Church (often called simply the Catholic Church) made up of all Christians who obey the teaching of the bishop of Rome—the pope—as the successor of Peter and the vicar of Jesus Christ. They believe that Jesus of Nazareth appointed Peter as leader among the twelve men called “Apostles” whom he appointed to teach his message, govern those who believe in him, and administer seven rituals (called “sacraments”) to communicate regularly and directly to his followers the sharing in God’s inner life—“grace”—that he obtained by his suffering, death, and resurrection. All bishops of the Catholic Church claim to be successors to the Apostles. In contrast with Protestants, Roman Catholics believe that the Bible is not sufficient as the vehicle of God’s special revelation to humanity but can only be understood fully when read in light of the teaching tradition of the Catholic bishops. Catholics also believe that, although the grace of faith comes from God alone, each individual can and must cooperate freely with that grace both to accept forgiveness from the eternal punishment due to sin (“hell”); to do penance for the lesser, “temporal” punishment of sin that does not send one to hell but must be forgiven before one can enter heaven; and to grow in charity, that is, the love of God and neighbor by a sharing in God’s own divine love. See also CHRISTIAN, PROTESTANTISM.

Smalkald Articles, The: A summary of the beliefs of the followers of Martin Luther that was drawn up in 1537 in preparation for a council of the Catholic Church that never materialized. It further clarified positions that the Lutherans had stated in the Augsburg Confession, drawing a stronger contrast between Lutheran views and those of the Catholic Church. See also AUGSBURG CONFESSION.

special revelation: A direct communication of truth from God to human beings by means beyond humans’ natural capacity of reasoning. The contents of sacred scriptures (such as the Bible) are an example of special revelation. Special revelation is correlated with “general revelation,” that is, the indirect knowledge of God that is available to all humanity through reflection on the order of the natural world, without the aid of direct inspirations.

Ten Commandments, The: See LAW OF MOSES.

theocratic: Having the qualities of a theocracy, that is, a regime ruled (or claiming to be ruled) more or less directly by God. Ancient Israel, especially before the establishment of its monarchy, was a theocracy, to which God communicated laws and judgments through the mediation of prophets such as Moses. See also LAW OF MOSES.

theological: related to the systematic study and explanation of God, especially through the study of texts inspired by God.

Thomist-Aristotelian: related to the schools of thought of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle or the medieval philosopher Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas’s thought incorporates a great deal of the thought of Aristotle. See also ARISTOTELIAN PHILOSOPHY and the subtopics on this site about THOMAS AQUINAS.
ARISTOTLE.

Wittenberg: The German city in which Martin Luther is considered to have begun the Reformation publicly in 1517 by posting a list of ninety-five theological declarations or “theses.” Luther had first gone to Wittenberg as an Augustinian monk to study at its university. He eventually joined the university’s faculty and became the head of the Augustinian order for the region.

OUTLINE OF THE ESSAY
(PROTESTANT REFORMERS)

I. Introduction
   A. Opposition to natural law theory is widespread among contemporary Protestants, regardless of their other differences in belief.
   B. Natural Law: A moral law in force at all times and in all places that God communicates to all humanity without the need of the Bible or other special revelation.
   C. The original Reformers taught that there was a natural law, and in this respect were in agreement with Roman Catholics.

II. Martin Luther (German)
   A. In How Christians Should Read Moses (1525), says that the Ten Commandments bind all people because they largely overlap with the natural law.
   B. In Temporal Authority, says that the natural law fills human reason and is the source of justice. Therefore, if a Christian’s neighbor does not treat him justly even if he treats his neighbor with love, the Christian should appeal to the natural law.
   C. Summary: There is only one set of ethics for both Christians and non-Christians because its principles are “written on the heart” of all human beings.

III. Philip Melanchthon (German)
   A. Was an important leader of the early Reformation: drafted three important early statements of the beliefs of the Reformation.
   B. Teachings on natural law:
      1. Although human beings require only the grace of faith in order to know God and be forgiven of sin, civil law—and therefore moral law—are necessary for political order.
      2. Moral philosophy arises from observing the regularity in nature combined with intuitive knowledge (experience, reason, revelation).
      3. Natural law has three functions:
          i. to teach humanity about God;
ii. to bring them to realize their need for forgiveness; and

iii. to maintain civil order.

4. All human beings must follow the Ten Commandments because they are an expression of natural law; though to follow them does not save or justify a person (forgive their sins)—only faith saves.

C. Some call him “the ethicist of the Reformation” because he thought so much about law.

IV. John Calvin (French/Swiss)

A. Despite his strong belief in God’s sovereignty and man’s depravity, he affirmed the existence of and need for a natural law because of man’s natural need to live in society. Nothing can eradicate the seeds of the natural law from within man.

B. Teachings:

1. Natural law is an instrument of God’s supreme rule over the world, by which he “bridles” human behavior.

2. It is because the natural law is known to man that his conscience tells him that he is guilty of sin; hence why even non-Christians cannot be excused for violations of the natural law.

3. Sin severely perverts man, but the image of God in him is not destroyed; hence his conscience remains.

V. Huldreich Zwingli (Swiss)

A. Took the other reformers’ explanations of law and applied them to the organization of civil society (political life) through the Biblical concept of “covenant.”

B. Teaching

1. Natural law is the basis for all human laws and provides a check against tyranny.

2. But only the God-fearing understanding the natural law correctly.

3. Natural law is a restraint on human nature; humanity would otherwise descend into anarchy.

VI. Conclusion

A. Scholarship has not paid attention to the influence of the Reformers on the Western legal tradition.

B. Although Protestantism differs from Roman Catholicism in important respects, it agrees with it in the affirmation of a natural law.
QUESTIONS FOR STUDY
(PROTESTANT REFORMERS)

Basic Interpretation

1. What is “special revelation?” What is an example of something that the Protestant Reformers believed to be part of special revelation?

2. Did the Reformers believe that one could know the natural law only through special revelation?

3. Why did Luther quip, “If the Ten Commandments are to be regarded as Moses’ law, then Moses came too late”? Are any aspects of the Law of Moses binding on even non-Christians, according to Luther? Why or why not?

4. Why did Philip Melanchthon think that law was still necessary even for those who believed in the Gospel?

5. What are the three functions of natural law, according to Melanchthon?

6. Why is Melanchthon often called “the ethicist of the Reformation”?

7. According to John Calvin, is man’s conscience destroyed by sin? Why is this important for his view of how people are saved from sin?

8. According to Calvin, why does man’s nature require a natural law?

9. According to Huldreich Zwingli, what is the role of natural law in civil society? How does natural law govern individuals’ behavior?

10. Did all of the founding Reformers discussed in this essay believe that non-Christians were obligated to follow the natural law? Why or why not?

Connections to Other Thinkers

1. Melanchthon says that law is necessary to restrain the wickedness of the human heart. Calvin calls law a “providential bridle.” Zwingli says that natural law’s primary role is to “restrain” human nature, which by itself would descend into anarchy. If original sin had not occurred and there were no wickedness in the world, would natural law therefore be superfluous for the Reformers? Thomas Aquinas, another Christian natural law thinker, said that law is necessary even in a sinless society. Why would Aquinas make such a statement? Is Aquinas using a different definition of “law”?
2. Dr. Charles points out that despite the fact that the Reformation was in many ways a departure from Roman Catholicism, the Reformers’ teaching on natural law was in fact in continuity with Catholic natural law thinking. On which points do the Reformers’ views of natural law agree with those of Thomas Aquinas or the Late Medieval thinkers?

3. In the second book of his Institutes of the Christian Religion, chapter 2, section 22, John Calvin defines natural law as follows: “natural law is that apprehension of the conscience which distinguishes sufficiently between just and unjust, and which deprives men of the excuse of ignorance [of their sins], while it proves them guilty by their own testimony.” Compare this definition with those of other thinkers on this site. In what ways does Calvin’s connection of natural law to sin and guilt make his notion of natural law especially different from that of the Early Modern Liberal thinkers like Hobbes and Locke?

4. In his “On Laws,” Philip Melanchthon, speaking of natural laws, says “since they are designated ‘natural,’ their formulas ought to be collected by a method of human reasoning through a natural syllogism. That is precisely what I have not yet seen done by anyone, and I by no means know whether it can at all be done, since our human reason is so enslaved and blinded. Paul moreover, in Rom. 2:15, teaches by a marvelously elegant and clear argument, that within us there is a natural law. He says that the Gentiles have conscience defending or accusing a thing done; and it is therefore a law unto them. For what is conscience but the judgment of our action which is demanded by some law or common formula? And so a natural law is a common judgment to which all men alike assent, and therefore one which God has inscribed upon the soul of each man, adapted to form and shape character.” How does what Melanchthon says here about the role of natural law in our moral choices (and its role in our understanding of the good that we choose) differ from or agree with the thought of the New Natural Law thinkers?

5. In his work “Is There Certitude in the Doctrines of Physics?” Philip Melanchthon says that truth is known for certain if “it is clear that, given [its] opposite, the destruction of nature follows.” Compare and contrast this notion of certainty with that of the Pragmatist and Progressive critics of the natural law tradition.

Critical Interpretation

1. In Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book 2, Chapter 7, section 10 Calvin says “All who are still unregenerate [who have not received the grace of faith and forgiveness of sins] feel—some more obscurely, some more openly—that they are not drawn to obey the [moral] law voluntarily, but impelled by a violent fear do so against their will and despite their opposition to it.” In Chapter 2, section 22, when commenting on Rom. 2:14–15, he states that “if the Gentiles by nature have law righteousness engraved upon their minds, we surely cannot say they are utterly blind as to the conduct of life. There is nothing more common than for a man to be sufficiently instructed in a right standard of conduct by natural law (of which the apostle is here speaking).” Taking these quotes together Calvin seems to say that although the moral law is in the mind by nature, the will (in a person who has not been redeemed from sin) is altogether opposed to it and repelled by it. If the human soul is one reality, how could the mind perceive the goodness of a law that the will treated as though it were not good?

2. Referring to the Ten Commandments given by Moses, Luther says, “I keep the commandments which Moses has given, not because Moses gave commandment, but because they have been
implanted in me by nature, and Moses agrees exactly with nature," (from Martin Luther, *How Christians Should Regard Moses*). Is Luther suggesting that his awareness of the requirements of nature is the standard by which to judge the authority of the Ten Commandments? Explain why or why not.

3. In his essay *Against the Antinomians*, Luther says, “It is most surprising to me that anyone can claim that I reject the law or the Ten Commandments, since there is available, in more than one edition, my exposition of the Ten Commandments, which furthermore are daily preached and practiced in our churches. . . . I myself, as old and as learned as I am, recite the commandments daily word for word like a child.” Can you reconcile this statement with what Luther teaches about the Ten Commandments in *How Christians Should Regard Moses*?

4. In his letter *Against the Sabbatarians*, Luther says, “even if a Moses had never appeared and Abraham had never been born, the Ten Commandments would have had to rule in all men from the very beginning, as they indeed did and still do.” If the law of nature already rules in men’s hearts without revelation, why would God make a point of including that law as part of his revelation, according to Jewish and Christian belief? Look to what Melanchthon says about the Ten Commandments (which he calls the Decalogue) in his essay “What Are the Causes of the Certitude of Doctrine?” for help. Or does Melanchthon’s view of the relationship between natural law and the Ten Commandments differ from Luther’s view?

5. Based on your reading of his commentary on the “Golden Rule” in the Gospel of Matthew, what do you think Zwingli believes to be the relationship between natural law and God’s revelation to humanity? Is man’s inner knowledge of the natural law on the same order as Biblical revelation for Zwingli?

6. In what ways do you see the Reformers’ opinions on natural law agreeing or disagreeing? Which of them agree most with each other? Which are most different from the others?

**Connections to Contemporary Issues**

1. If Paul’s Letter to the Romans—an important guide for Protestant thinking—clearly speaks of a law written on the human heart by which even non-Christians can know the universal moral law, why might many Protestants who came after Luther, Melanchthon, Calvin, and Zwingli have rejected the notion of a moral law that human beings can know apart from Biblical revelation?

2. In his essay on “Temporal Authority,” Martin Luther praises a duke who used “untrammeled reason,” rather than written laws to make a decision. Why should we live by written laws at all if they can result in unjust decisions? If there is an unwritten natural law that all can know, why not allow those in authority to decide in each case what the right thing to do is?

3. The history of the United States is heavily informed by Protestant Christianity. The earliest settlers of the British colonies of North America and the generation that waged the Revolutionary War and ratified the Constitution were Protestant Christians. Although many debate the orthodoxy of the Christian beliefs of many of the Founding Fathers, nevertheless the way in which they speak about religion is heavily informed by Protestantism. Can you point to
documents found on this website that show evidence of Christian beliefs in the Founders’ or other early American figures’ statements concerning natural law?

4. Christianity was present not only in the earliest stages of America’s history, but also in some of its most critical points, especially in popular and political movements to protect human and civil rights. Can you point to evidence on this website or elsewhere of how Americans’ Christian beliefs informed this country’s debates over slavery, women’s rights, and civil rights for African Americans? In those debates did Christians ever refer to natural law in defense of their position, and how? Was their belief in a natural law tied to their Christian beliefs, and if yes, how?

5. Recent years have witnessed heated controversy in the United States over whether it is right to post displays of the Ten Commandments in front of government buildings or in other public places. Those against argue that such displays violate the separation of church and state and impose religion on others. Those in favor argue that the Commandments represent the universal natural law on which all law must be based in order to be legitimate. They say that it is very helpful for us as a society to have public reminders that we cannot make our laws however we like, for we are all bound to a higher, unchanging standard of justice. Which position do you think Martin Luther or any of the other Reformers would have agreed with, and why? Would they have argued from their religious convictions or from reason? Which position do you agree with?

6. Which portions of the Ten Commandments, if any, would be unacceptable to non-Jews or non-Christians? Which portions could any reasonable person of good will accept?

7. John Adams famously said that “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other,” (“Message from John Adams to the Officers of the First Brigade of the Third Division of the Militia of Massachusetts,” October 11, 1798). Do you agree with his statement? If even Christians admit that the foundation of civil law (the natural law) can be known by reason alone, why should religion have anything to do with our public life? What would the Reformers say about the role of religion in civil society, particularly in relation to the natural law?

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