

# Natural Law, Natural Knowledge Of God, Civic Righteousness, And Their Application To The Boy Scout Question

[Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, V. 69 : 1972, p.67-79]

By Carl Lawrenz

There is a natural knowledge of God, a knowledge of God outside of God's revelation of Himself in Holy Scripture. This is not a saving knowledge of God. Though therefore limited in scope this natural knowledge of God is true as far as it goes (*aletheia* Ro 1:18,21) God has also endowed all men with their conscience to bear witness to them about their relationship to Him as their God and of their accountability to Him for their conduct over against His inscribed law (Ro 2:14-16; 1:32). This natural knowledge of God in man goes beyond the bare realization that there is a God and embraces a consciousness of His eternal power, glory, wisdom, goodness, righteousness (Ro 1:20,32; 2:4; Ac 14:15-17; 17:24-27; Ps 19). Man's natural knowledge of God can be deepened and developed by a study of nature (Ro 1:20) and of history (Ac 14:15-17; 17:24-27).

Even as natural man has a certain knowledge of God, so he also has the ability to discern in a measure, as far as outward deeds are concerned, what is morally good and evil. This ability comes from the inscribed Law. Man has a realization of the divine authority of this inscribed law, a realization of his accountability before God to act according to this inscribed Law (Ro 2:14-16; 1:32).

In Romans 2:14-16 St. Paul distinguishes between three things: the inscribed law, conscience and a flood of judging thoughts. The Apostle asserts that also the gentiles, who do not have the revealed law, do the things contained in the law. He does not say that they do them regularly; much less that they do them properly, so that God's law is satisfied with their obedience. The whole context makes it clear that the gentiles are not capable of performing truly good works. Paul is speaking of outward acts which men can see and evaluate. He points out that with their occasional efforts, whenever they do the things contained in the law, these unregenerate gentiles give unmistakable evidence that the work of the law is written within their hearts. This inscribed law is not something that they have acquired through speculation by the trial and error method; it is not a summary of what through experience and observation they have found to be most expedient in regulating human conduct; it does not consist of conventions which through usage and training have gradually acquired the force of law. No, this inscribed Law forms the starting point of all ethical thinking and judging. Man did not write it into his heart; he finds it there written by another hand. Paul speaks of the gentiles doing by nature the things contained in the law. The same God who created their nature is also the author of the inscribed Law. They may not like it, but it is unrelenting in its demands.

St. Paul adds: "...their conscience also bearing witness." Conscience corroborates the testimony of the inscribed law. Conscience is more than an activity of the intellect discerning what is morally good and evil; it is more than a moral function, judging the ethical merits or demerits of specific human conduct. *Conscience is a religious function, a consciousness of God, which confirms the inscribed law as the law of God and declares the demands of this law as divinely binding.* In performing this function conscience calls forth the flood of accusing and excusing thoughts which Paul mentions. The Apostle does not say that the conscience of natural man is always correct, just as little as he says that the inscribed law is always correctly understood. When God at creation inscribed the law, it was a perfectly reliable expression of his holy will. When God at creation gave man his conscience, it was likewise an infallible witness. As man's entire nature became corrupt through the Fall, also the inscribed law became blurred and his conscience subject to error. Yet for the purpose of bringing forth civic righteousness both still function sufficiently, inducing man to accept God's judgment, based on the inscribed law and the testimony of the conscience, as just and inescapable.<sup>1</sup>

**The Use that Natural Man Makes of his Natural Knowledge of God and of His Law.**

The natural knowledge of God, though true in itself so far as the substance is concerned, is inevitably turned into something false when handled by natural man. For he applies it, and by himself can apply it, only according to the basic lie introduced by Satan into the world, the *opinio legis* (Ga 3:63). Instead of using his natural knowledge of God to honor and serve God in the spirit of grateful love, natural man invariably deals with God, insofar as he has a natural knowledge of Him, in the spirit of the Law, endeavoring to appease His wrath and merit His favor (Ro 1:21; Ac 14:8-18; 17:22-31). This is the initial catastrophic step in repressing the truth of the natural knowledge of God. This repressing Paul ascribes to all men as they are by nature (Ro 1:18). It is not due to ignorance but to his inborn wickedness, to the fact that man is steeped in unrighteousness.

The *opinio legis* in which He operates with his natural knowledge of God leads man to neutralize this knowledge with further vain and foolish ideas and actions, so that it may not interfere with the satisfaction of the evil lusts of his heart. Hence many ultimately sink through God's judgment into the depths of filth and vice (Ro 1:21-23).

Some, indeed, turn moralists, trying to curb by their judgments the reckless living of their fellowmen (Ro 2:1-8). But in doing so, guided by the same *opinio legis*, they only condemn themselves, for in essence they commit the same things. Particularly do they stand condemned in that they harden their hearts in impenitence over against the revelation of God's goodness as it appears even in their own personal history (Ro 2:4). With impenitent hearts they act on the assumption that man's nature is inherently good, that in order to achieve real goodness of life it is enough to instruct the understanding properly and to influence the will by censure or praise. They are blind to the fact that crimes and vices are merely symptoms of the total depravity of the human heart that a complete change of heart is necessary, which only the Gospel can effect.

It is this activity of the moralist, which characterizes the use to which the natural knowledge of God and of his law is put in the program of Scouting. In its basic oath and law, to which every Scout must subscribe. Scouting expresses a recognition of God and of an obligation to Him. In offering this oath and law as something that is adapted to every boy, it operates with the assumption that it lies within the power of every boy ("on my honor") to make a proper use of his recognition of God and to fulfil his duty toward Him. Scouting says of its entire program:

In the first part of the Scout oath or promise the boy declares, "On my honor I will do my best to do my duty to God and my country and to obey the Scout law." The recognition of God as the ruling and leading power in the universe and the grateful acknowledgment of His favors and blessings are necessary to the best type of citizenship and are wholesome precepts in the education of the growing boys.<sup>2</sup>

Scouting as set forth and unfolded in its official literature is blind to man's natural depravity and his need of a complete change of heart through faith in the Savior's pardoning grace. It is therefore not at all incidental to find expressions like the following in an official Boy Scout Handbook:

You promise on your honor to keep yourself morally straight. No one but yourself will know how faithfully you practice this part of your oath. It is a test of your honor and your strength. Science tells us that every time we do anything, nerve impulses make trails in our brain. When we repeat that action, we widen the trail. Our actions tend to follow that trail as water runs down a creek bed, and so we form a habit. Try moving the furniture in your room, and see how you stumble over it. The same thing happens in your mind when you rearrange your habits. If you form the right sort of habits, your actions follow automatically.

You have it in your power to make the right sort of track in your brain that will determine how you will act. Every boy can say to himself, "I will be what I want to be." Your actions follow your thoughts. You can control your thoughts. It comes down to a matter of right thinking, and building right habits.<sup>3</sup>

Though this particular crass expression of blindness to man's natural depravity is not found in the latest *Boy Scout Handbook*, the blindness itself has not been deleted. It is so much part and parcel of the basic thinking of Scoutism that assertion upon assertion also in the most recent official handbook make sense only when read in the light of Scouting's premise of not reckoning with the natural depravity of every boy. This can readily be seen from the following statements:

The moment you join a patrol and a troop you enter a brotherhood that spans the world. The boys in it are of different countries and colors and creeds, but they are brothers together, living up to the same Scout oath and Law that you are following.<sup>4</sup>

There is something about the Scout Law that makes it different from other laws. Most other laws start with a "Do" or a "Don't." Not the Scout Law. The Scout Law is a statement of facts: "A Scout *is* trustworthy...loyal...helpful...friendly...courteous...kind...obedient...cheerful...thrifty...brave...clean...reverent." By doing your best to live up to the Scout Law, you are a Scout. If you should *willfully* break the Scout Law, you are not a Scout. It is as simple as that.<sup>5</sup>

We raise no objections when the *Boy Scout Handbook* says:

All your life you will be associated with people of different faiths. In America we believe in religious freedom. That is why we respect others, whose religion may differ from ours, although for reason of conscience we do not agree with them.<sup>6</sup>

Yet we cannot go along with Scouting when it adds:

Their customs may be different from ours, but their hearts are just as true, their faith just as sincere.<sup>6</sup>

The premise of a denial of man's natural depravity and spiritual blindness is again showing through.

### **The Spiritual function of the Natural Knowledge of God and His Law in Natural Man**

Scripture assigns no positive spiritual value or function to the natural knowledge of God and of his law in natural man. It knows only of the negative one of depriving man of any pretext for his failings, so that he may realize to his consternation that he is without excuse (Ro 1:20; 2:1-5). In the service of the Church's commission to preach the Gospel, we, too, can make use of man's natural knowledge of God and of his law only for the purpose of bringing the sinner to a realization of his guilt and condemnation that he may despair in himself. Man's natural knowledge of God and of his law forms the starting-point (*Anknuepfungepunkt*) for the Church's preaching of the law, whereby the sinner is humbled in preparation for the Gospel message, which alone can produce saving faith and a thankful life of Christian sanctification. Thus Paul used the natural knowledge of God in Romans 1 and 2; thus he used it also at Lystra and at Athens (Acts 14 and 17).

This is not the use to which the natural knowledge of God and of his law is put in Scouting. The Scout program abuses this knowledge in the manner of the moralist. When the individual Christian associates and identifies himself with Scouting, he therefore strengthens and confirms all those in the Scout organization who are not Christians in this abuse of their natural knowledge of God and of His law; he fails to help them to a realization of their guilt and condemnation, of their need of a complete change of heart through the Gospel. In other words) he vitiates his Christian testimony to sin and grace.

This is also true when the church participates in Scouting, associates and identifies itself with it, and tries to integrate it in its own Gospel program of character training. The church thereby fails to testify to the

sponsors and adherents of Scouting who are not Christians that they stand condemned before God in the efforts that they make on the basis of their natural knowledge of God and of his law to do their duty to God and to keep themselves morally straight. The church is confirming them in their false and fatal convictions, is withholding the testimony, which it owes to them, that what they need is a complete change of heart, which only the Gospel of Christ Jesus can effect. The Church lets it appear as though the moralizing activity of Scouting and a Christian's life of sanctification wrought and motivated by the Gospel were really akin, while they stand diametrically apart, as far apart as a life before God on the basis of the law and a life before him on the basis of the Gospel.

This is not remedied by the arrangement that the advocates of Scouting in the Lutheran Church endeavor to carry out the Scout program in their own troops in the light of the Gospel. For this vital correction, even if we assume that it can be carried out effectively in Lutheran Scout troops, is still withheld from the larger Scout membership, with which the Lutheran Scouts are identified in one organization. Scouting operates with the assumption that the work of the different religious bodies, Christian and non-Christian, can all render service in carrying out the Scout program, and that Scouting will materially aid all the religious bodies in carrying out their own educational work. It holds that such an integration can be effected with benefit to both parties under the tacit assumption that Scoutism as such represents what is basic to all religions, while the various religious bodies differ merely in some details which they find helpful to add.<sup>7</sup> By participating in Scouting the church fails to bring clear testimony against these false assumptions.

### **The Function of the Natural Knowledge of God and of His Law in the Life of a Christian**

In a Christian's life of sanctification the natural knowledge of God and the inscribed law perform a function similar to that of the revealed Law in its third use (Psalm 19).

### **The Function of the Natural Knowledge of God and of His Law in Promoting Civic Righteousness**

The natural knowledge of God and of his law performs a vital function in promoting civic righteousness (Ro 2:14-16). In a certain measure it can and does serve to keep people as they are by nature from gross crime and vice and to incite them to outward decent living.

### **Civic Righteousness, Its Nature and Purpose, and How it is Maintained**

Civic righteousness is a term that has been coined by the Church. Our Lutheran Confessions speak repeatedly of *iustitia civilis*, which is translated in the English text of the *Triglot* as "civil righteousness." Though Scripture does not use the term civic or civil righteousness, it does teach the substance that is meant to be covered by it.

Ever since the Fall the earthly life of mankind is meant to be covered by it. God has permitted fallen mankind to sojourn here on earth that he might carry out his eternal purpose of redeeming all sinners through His incarnate Son and of proclaiming the Gospel of his saving grace to make them partakers of this salvation from sin and death. Not until he has called, enlightened, sanctified, and gathered the entire number of his elect through the Gospel and thus perfected his church of believers unto eternal life, will he destroy this world and bring mankind's earthly life to an end. In the meantime men are to live and dwell together here on earth, each for his appointed time. To make this possible for God's gracious purposes, when mankind is by nature totally depraved, at least a measure of outward decency, peace, and order needs to be maintained.

To effect this God has established certain ordinances for mankind. The institution of marriage and the home, established in paradise, remained in effect also after the Fall. God has ordained human authority beyond the home in the form of civil authority (Ge 9:6; Ro 13:1-7; 1 Pe 2:13-14; Jn 19:11). No specific kind of government is prescribed by God, nor any specific manner of establishing it, but "the powers that be are

ordained of God." With threats of punishment human government acts and is to act as a deterrent, checking and restraining the evil designs of the wicked, preventing crime and violence. After a foul deed has been committed, government is to be a revenger, inflicting speedy and adequate punishment on the guilty one. On the other hand, government is to protect the law-abiding citizen that he may be benefited. It is this righteousness among men that God maintains through civil authority, that we mean when we speak of civic or civil righteousness. It has to do with outward deeds and acts insofar as they make for a measure of peace and order quite apart from the motivation by which they are performed. In maintaining civic righteousness human government is not interested in motives as such, in their spiritual value, but merely insofar as motives are effective in promoting certain outward deeds and restraining others.

God has not merely ordained civil authority to maintain civic righteousness. He has at the same time left natural man, though corrupt in sin, the ability to show an understanding for such civil authority, the ability to see its necessity and usefulness the ability to establish it, and to make necessary and appropriate laws and ordinances, and finally the ability to render in a measure the civic righteousness which it demands. Our Lutheran Confessions sum up this ability of man as "human reason," meaning the full scope of the abilities which Scripture ascribes to natural man, and which are sufficient unto these ends.

This is first of all, a measure of ability to distinguish in purely earthly and secular affairs between that which is beneficial and that, which is detrimental. Out of this ability the smaller and larger human communities set up adequate police regulations: health rules, sanitation ordinances, traffic laws, building codes, banking rules, trade statutes, zoning regulations, tax measures (1 Pe 2:13-14)

Included in the natural endowment of man which promotes civic righteousness are also certain natural impulses and emotions: the impulse of self-preservation, the natural love between parents and children, between husband and wife, the affection of human friendship, the patriotic love of country, the sympathetic feelings toward fellowmen in misery and need (Lk 11:11,13; Isa 49:15; Jn 15:13; Lk 23:27). These emotions as they manifest themselves in the unregenerate and lead them to outward action are something different from love that flows out of faith-born fear and love of God. Hence they have no spiritual value in God's sight. Yet they promote civic righteousness.

When we speak of human reason we furthermore include the ability to discern in a measure, as far as outward deeds are concerned, what is morally good and evil. This ability comes from the inscribed Law. Included is a realization of the divine authority of this inscribed law, a realization of man's accountability before God to act according to this inscribed law (Natural knowledge of God, conscience). This endowment enables man to establish civil authority to exercise the function, which God would have it perform of punishing the evil doers and of protecting the law-abiding. It enables human government to enact suitable laws and statutes and to acknowledge the criteria of common law and equity for judging ethical acts, At the same time it leads men to show a measure of respect for such laws and to guide their conduct according to them.

All of these human endowments summed up as "human reason" do to a certain degree serve to hold most people back from gross crime and vice and to incite them to a measure of outward decent living.<sup>8</sup> These outward deeds when effected in the unbeliever, of course, have no spiritual value before God, inasmuch as they are born out of slavish fear, out of the vain attempt to justify themselves, out of selfish motivations of pride, honor, and reward. They do not however, make for a measure of decency, peace and order in human relations; they make for civic righteousness. God is not interested in civic righteousness for its own sake. The maintenance and safeguarding of civic righteousness, which God effects through civil authority on the basis of all that belongs to "human reason," is not God's ultimate aim. It is merely a means to an end. God's ultimate aim is the peaceful development, internal growth, and external spread of the church, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty (1 Tm 2:2), that the churches may have rest to be edified and built up. (Ac 9:31).

For the preservation of human society God also uses the civic-righteousness fostered by Scouting on the basis of the natural endowment of man. From this point of view we may also rather see an organization like

Scouting in the world about us than an atheistic society flouting every outward observance of the demands of God's law. For a Christian to participate in Scouting, however, involves other considerations.

### **The Civic Righteousness of the Christian**

The Christian, while a member of Christ's church in the spiritual sphere, is at the same time a citizen in the secular sphere. As such he is obligated to fulfil all that civil authority looks for and has a right to demand in the way of civic righteousness. Yet as a Christian he will fulfil all these demands as a part of his life of sanctification. For when the Christian according to the new man shuns the gross works of the flesh and shows himself honest, trustworthy, temperate and chaste in his human relations, works faithfully for his living, provides for his dependents, respects the rights of others, pays his taxes, conscientiously obeys civil laws and ordinances, he does all these things out of faith-born fear and love of God. They are then fruit of the Spirit pleasing in God's sight. But this is an evaluation on which lies beyond the function and judgment, of civil authority. Before the bar of civil authority the deeds which the Christian actually renders as a part of his life of sanctification and similar deeds which the unregenerate perform as mere outward works of the law, both alike count as civic righteousness. Of course, when the Christian in his weakness still fulfills the demands of civil authority out of motives of his flesh, such as fear, pride, and reward, then also his deeds lie on the same spiritual plane as the outward works of the unregenerate; then they are mere civic righteousness. Yet such works of the flesh the Christian will want to mortify and restrain. Wherever and whenever motives are stressed the Christian will want to give a clear testimony that his conduct is prompted by thankful love for the Savior.

### **The Promotion of Civic is Not Assigned to the Church as Its Specific Task and Function**

The Church as the Communion of Saints, as the spiritual body of believers in Christ, has only one entrusted task and function: It is to preach the Gospel to all creatures. (Mk 16:15; Mt 28:19,20; Lk 24:47,48). This, however, means proclaiming, the whole counsel of God in his word to all men. For the entire Word of God, which the church is to proclaim without human alterations, subtractions, or additions, stands in close relation to the central message of pardon and salvation in Christ. In proclaiming and applying any part of God's Word to men, the church is to keep it in its proper relation to this message and to divorce no part from this message. Only thus will all of its testimony remain a part of the proclamation of the Gospel, the one task assigned to the church.

The Church is to preach the Gospel, the whole counsel of God, to the unregenerate that through its testimony the Holy Spirit may bring ever more sinners to saving faith in Christ. With its testimony the church is not bidden to reform sinners, to induce them merely to lead outwardly decent and orderly lives, but to convert them so that the number of Christ's believers may be increased.

The church is to preach the Gospel, the whole counsel of God to those who have already come to faith, that they may be strengthened and furthered in their Christian faith, joy, comfort, understanding, love, sanctification, hope, that the body of Christ may be edified from within.

Whatever does not serve the edification of Christ's Church of believers, either by adding to their number or by furthering those who already belong to it in faith and life, cannot rightfully be called the function and work of the Church. The Church is not bidden to be the guardian of public morals, to function as the instructor of civic authority to initiate and to foster social reform, to induce men to lead outwardly decent and orderly lives.

In the interest of winning sinners to faith and of perfecting them in faith, the Church is also to preach the law, God's holy will, to all men. The only use of the law that can come into consideration in the Church's testimony to the unregenerate is that of a mirror, that through it sinners be brought to a knowledge of their sins and their utter condemnation before God. Thus the real message of the Church, its message of gracious pardon and salvation in Christ, is served. For the sinner must be humbled and crushed, before the Gospel can awaken

blessed faith in his heart. By preaching the law to unbelievers for the express purpose of leading them to outward decency and uprightness, before they have been converted, the Church would hinder its real work and fall into the role of a reformer. It would contribute toward hardening people in their self-righteousness.

For this very reason we hold that the church cannot identify and associate itself with the program of Scouting, which is intended for every boy as he is by nature and yet endeavors to use the law as a guide and a rule. By endorsing this program the Church is vitiating its testimony to sin and grace.

To those, however, who have already come to faith, to its members, the Church is to preach the law in all of its uses. Because of his flesh, still clinging to him, because of the bitter battle which the Christian must wage with his Old Adam in his daily life of sanctification, he needs to hear the law as a curb, as a mirror, and as a guide.

### **In the Pursuit of its God-entrusted Activity the Church at the Same Time Promotes Civic Righteousness**

Through the Gospel the church gives its members a motives, the motive of faith-born fear and love of God, which will constrain them to render all that civic authority looks for and has a right to demand in the way of those deeds and actions which make for decency, peace, and order in human relations. The more sinners that the church through its testimony leads to bow before the condemning verdict of God's Law and to accept salvation and a new life in Christ, the more people will there be who out of thankful love for the Savior will be constrained to meet all the demands of civic righteousness. But it is sanctification, not civic righteousness as such that the church fosters in its members. In a similar manner the church also promotes civic righteousness as it instructs *its members* for their life of sanctification concerning the divine origin and true purpose and function of human government.

Inasmuch as the church commits all of its own needs and the needs of all men to the Lord in confident prayers, it prays also for the establishment and maintenance of civic righteousness. In this it heeds the admonition of St. Paul, 1 Timothy 2:1,2. The church is mindful in its prayer for civic righteousness of the purpose which such outward peace and order is to serve under God's provident guidances, namely the purpose of providing a time of grace for men that his ultimate purpose of the salvation of man, of the growth and completion of his church be furthered. As in all prayers for earthly gifts so also in this one the believers confidently leave it to the Lord to answer it in his own time according to his wisdom, power, and grace. Thus the Church continued to voice this prayer even in the midst of wars, disasters, and social upheavals knowing that such judgments also have a wholesome purpose under God.

In an indirect way the church also promotes civic righteousness in those who have not come to faith in Christ. This is a by-product of the church's God-given activity, of its God-given testimony. It is simply this that the church through its testimony to sin and grace in the midst of a human community, particularly also through the sanctified life of its members, exerts a marked influence even upon the conduct and behavior, the thoughts and the judgments of those who are not believers or have not yet come to faith. Their conscience is sharpened, the inscribed law and their natural knowledge of God is confirmed. For example, the faithful testimony of the Apostolic Church in word and deed and its growth through such faithful testimony had a remarkable influence upon the social order of its day, eradicating many of its abuses. A great deal might be said on this point. This is not necessary, however, inasmuch as it is a by-product of the church's activity. Over-stressing it always brings with it the temptation of making it an end in itself for the church. To this temptation the church is succumbing when it enters upon a cooperative relationship with the Boy Scout organization. For Scouting in itself, Scouting in its basic unchangeable program, as outlined in its Constitution, is a direct instrument for *mere* civic righteousness. Let the church be true to its own God-given function, and God will also let it be a force toward civic righteousness, but will let it bring forth civic righteousness as a by-product according to His purposes.

ENDNOTES:

1 The previous two paragraphs to a great extent summarize Joh. P. Meyers fine exposition of Romans 2:14-16 in his essay, "The Natural Knowledge and Civic Righteousness," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* (*Quartalschrift*), XLIV (Oct., 1974), 231-243.

2 Constitution (1971), Article II, Section 2—Principles, p. 15.

3 *Handbook for Boys*, 1951. p. 25.

4 *Boy Scout Handbook*, Seventh Edition, Jan. 1971, p. 43.

5 *Ibid.* page 38.

6 *Ibid.*, page 51.

7 *Ibid.*, page 51.

8 *Triglotta*, pp. 121,7; 157,9; 335,70; 127,22-24.