

God the Lawgiver according to the Westminster Divine Burgess

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Abstract

In this essay, we will consider the way in which Anthony Burgess—and therefore, presumably, the Westminster Confession of Faith—grounds its doctrine of God’s law in an “experimental awareness of the exalted Lawgiver.” His and their understanding of the law is not abstract or philosophical, but rather theological and therefore personal. We will conclude with some brief comments on the implications of Burgess’s work for contemporary reflections about natural law in the Reformed theological community.

Ernest Kevan, in his survey of the doctrine of God’s law in Puritan theology, says, “The Puritans began their thinking on this subject, not with an abstract concept of ‘law,’ but with the experimental awareness of the exalted Lawgiver: behind the *lex* stood the legislator.”¹ This truth can certainly be demonstrated

¹ Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), 47. On the challenges related to the use of the term “Puritan,” see Chad Van Dixhoorn, *God’s Ambassadors: The Westminster Assembly and the Reformation of the English Pulpit, 1643–1653* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 11–16.

to be the case with the English divine Anthony Burgess in his understanding of the law of God. Burgess is not as well known today as are other members of the Westminster Assembly, but if the assembly minutes and his publications are any indication, he was highly respected among his peers.² In relationship to the Westminster Confession of Faith, his most important work was his lectures on the law of God published under the title *Vindiciae Legis: or, A Vindication of the Morall Law and the Covenants, from the Errours of Papists, Arminians, Socinians, and More Especially, Antinomians*.³ A series of lectures delivered at Lawrence-Jury, London, during the period in which the Westminster Confession of Faith was being drafted, *Vindiciae Legis* presents us with a theology of the law of God at the apex of the English Puritan period from one who can rightly be described as working within the mainstream of orthodox teaching on this controversial locus of theology.

These lectures are of great value to students of the Westminster Confession because they provide a window into the biblical and theological rationale for what appears in its doctrinal affirmations. What we have in the Westminster Confession are summary statements drawn from what were often laborious debates among the divines at the assembly. In addition to the minutes now available, it is in the publications by the divines, often concurrent with the work of the Assembly, that we have fuller access to their thinking and debates.⁴ A work of polemical theology like *Vindiciae Legis* affords us the opportunity to observe a detailed exposition of and rationale for the brief statements found in the Confession of Faith. Rather than simply bringing our own preconceived notions to our reading and interpretation of this document, we should allow its original framers and their explanations to inform our understanding.

I. *The Ontological Ground of Law in General*

According to Burgess, the law of God as revealed in Scripture, both natural and moral, lives and moves and has its being in the character of God

² See Chad Van Dixhoorn, ed., *The Minutes and Papers of the Westminster Assembly, 1643–1652* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1:52; hereafter *MPWA*; and Stephen J. Casselli, *Divine Rule Maintained: Anthony Burgess, Covenant Theology, and the Place of the Law in Reformed Scholasticism* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016), 149–52.

³ Anthony Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis: or, A Vindication of the Morall Law and the Covenants, from the Errours of Papists, Arminians, Socinians, and More Especially, Antinomians*. In *XXX Lectures, Preached at Lawrence-Jury, London*, 2nd ed. corr. and augmented (London: James Young for Thomas Underhill, 1647; repr., Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), preface.

⁴ See <https://www.westminsterassembly.org/>.

himself. This perspective is made plain as Burgess expounds the relationship of Adam and Moses to the revealed law of God. These two figures and their respective relationships to the law of God serve as windows into his theology of the law more broadly. The law of God for Burgess is a revelation of the person of God both within man (in the image of God) and outside of him (in the created order).

He begins his lectures on the law with some reflections on 1 Timothy 1:8–9, focusing on the clause, “knowing the law is good if a man use it lawfully.” His burden in this opening lecture is to demonstrate how it can be said that the moral law is in fact good. The second point of his argument is that the law is good “in respect of the authority stamped upon it by God, whereby it becomes a rule unto us.”⁵ This goodness, in other words, is grounded in the divine origin of the moral law. He says, “Seeing the matter is intrinsically and eternally good, it cannot but be commanded by God.”⁶ He goes on to explain,

There are some things that are *justa*, because *Deus vult*; as in all positive things: and then there are other things just, and therefore God wills them, *though even they are also just, because they are consonant to that eternall justice and goodness in himself*: so that, indeed, it is so farre from being true, that the Law, which hath Gods authority stamp on it for a rule, and so is *mandatum*, should be abrogated, that it is impossible, *nè per Deum quidem*; for then God should deny his own justice and goodness.⁷

The deep theological presupposition that the goodness of the law is grounded in the character of the person of the lawgiver must not be missed at the outset of his discussion, as it governs the whole of his thinking moving forward. There is no consideration of an abstract concept of law to which both creator and creature are subject. Even those things that are “just and therefore God wills them,” are grounded in the good and just character of God himself.

II. *The Ontological Ground of Natural Law*

The theological starting point for Burgess’s thinking about law is again made clear when he turns next in his lectures to a discussion of “natural law.” His text is Romans 2:14–15, “For when the Gentiles which know not the law, do the things of the law by nature, these having not the law, are a law unto themselves: which shew the work of the law written in their hearts.”

⁵ Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

In “clearing” this text he asks a series of questions, the third being, “In what sense they are said to doe the things of the law, and that by nature?”⁸ It becomes clear that he is not merely engaging here in a piece of moral philosophy. He denies that the “heathen” can do any work morally good. The reason for this is that “every action ought to have a supernaturall end, viz. the glory of God, which they did not aime at.”⁹ He goes on to clarify his reasoning when he says, “We do refuse that distinction of a *morall good*, and *theologicall*, because *every morall good ought to be theologicall*.”¹⁰ There can be no moral good which is not grounded theologically. God alone can determine the good. Only what is done to the glory of God can be truly called good. Thus, in Romans 2:14, “By *nature* therefore we may understand that naturall light of conscience, whereby they judged and performed some externall acts, though these were done by the help of God.”¹¹ Even for the external performance of some acts which apparently (or externally) conform to the law of God, the unbeliever is dependent upon the gracious help of God.

There is something, Burgess says, that we can properly call “natural law,” but there is no autonomous human law. He explains that “God onely is under no law.”¹² Because God is the fountain from which all human law flows, he cannot be said to be under law himself. All human law is a reflection of the natural law “written in their hearts” (Rom 2:15). Elsewhere he reasons that “although God have no superiour, and so cannot be bound by a Law above him, yet he is a Law to himself, so that he cannot but do wisely and righteously in all his waies.”¹³ Although in their sinful rebellion human beings may try to deny their created status, they continually, even if unknowingly, declare the law of God to be written in their hearts. They do so both “externally” and “internally,” according to Burgess. Man created in the image of God is not only subject to the “law of nature” but is morally cognizant of the fact that he is so subjected.

The moral law written in the heart is not totally defaced by the fall; neither is it only restored by regeneration. There is a continuing obligation and knowledge of the law in Adam (and the race) now as fallen. Burgess has a lengthy discussion of the moral law as it relates to the unbeliever.¹⁴ There he argues from Romans 2:14–15 that there are “common notions and maximes,

⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid. (emphasis added).

¹¹ Ibid., 59–60.

¹² Ibid., 64.

¹³ Anthony Burgess, *The True Doctrine of Justification Asserted and Vindicated from the Errors of Many, and More Especially Papists and Socinians* (London: Thomas Underhill, 1654), 2:77.

¹⁴ Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 57–104.

which are ingrafted in all mens hearts.”¹⁵ He describes this light of nature in the unbeliever as “a relic or remnant of the image of God” and a “residue of the glorious image of God” which leaves all men inexcusable before God.¹⁶ Thus, even the unregenerate have a clear knowledge of God and their moral obligation to him, and yet this is no saving knowledge apart from the gospel. He is willing to admit that the bounds of this knowledge and obligation are not easily defined, but that they do exist is made plain in Scripture.¹⁷

He goes on to explain that externally unbelievers declare the works of the law written in their hearts in two ways: “1. By making good and wholesome lawes to govern men by; and 2. By their practice, at least of some of them, according to those lawes.”¹⁸ Internally they show the law written in their hearts “by their consciences, in the comfort or feare they [have] there.”¹⁹ Externally human beings often act in obedience to those humanly established laws which reflect their internal moral compass. This internal and external conformity to the law of God is a revelation of the person of God. The unbeliever has both internally and externally the revelation of the law of God speaking clearly to him, though he attempts to suppress that revelation continually. He explains further that they were “not without a Law ingrafted in their conscience, whereby they had common dictates about good and evil.”²⁰

He is quick to point out that this writing of the law in the heart is to be distinguished carefully from that spoken of as a work of grace in the redeemed. Commenting on Romans 2:14–15, he says,

You must not, with *Austine* [Augustine], compare this place with that gracious promise in *Jeremy* [Jeremiah], of God writing his law in the hearts of his people. There is therefore a two-fold *writing in the hearts of men*; the first, of knowledge and judgement, whereby they apprehend what is good and bad: the second is in the will and affections, by giving a propensity and delight, with some measure of strength, to do this upon good grounds.²¹

Elsewhere he says that men everywhere witness to the law of God in their hearts in making laws “whereby things intrinsically good are commanded, and intrinsically evil are prohibited”²² This law written on the heart is, as

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67, 72, 70.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 62–64.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ From Anthony Burgess, *Spiritual Refining*, cited by Kevan, *The Grace of Law*, 59.

²¹ Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 60.

²² Burgess, *True Doctrine of Justification*, 2:387.

Paul goes on to say, the foundation for the conscience in the unbeliever. Natural law understood biblically is a given in human beings created in God's image. However, it is also limited by the effects of the fall to "knowledge and judgement" or a sense of right and wrong, but the "will and affections" remain bound in sinful weakness. The presence of this natural law therefore, as Paul says in Romans 1:20, leaves people "without excuse" before their creator.

III. *The Ontological Ground of Moral Law*

Having treated that natural law revealed to all people in general revelation, Burgess then moves on to address the moral law of God revealed to his people in special revelation. Throughout *Vindiciae Legis* Burgess reflects on the moral law from two perspectives; the one he calls "mere rule," and the other "law as a covenant." One might expect that under the head "law as law" or "mere rule" he would mean a consideration of law in the abstract. That, however, is not what we find. Even in law "in itself," his theocentric reference point is clearly set forth and cannot be ignored. The two perspectives from which the law can be viewed reveal diverse attributes of the lawgiver, but neither perspective considers law apart from God. He simply cannot unhitch himself from his theological moorings. He is not able to conceive of the notion of law as being independent from the person of the lawgiver. The law considered as law primarily reveals the supreme authority of the divine will, while the law considered as covenant primarily reveals the gracious character of his person. These two points can be clearly demonstrated by a study of his discussion regarding the law given to both Adam and Moses, to which we now turn.

1. *The Law Given to Adam as Mere Rule*

The law considered as law in itself reveals the absolute dominion and power of the will of God. Adam is given a positive law in addition to the natural law of conscience to test his obedience to the dominion of the lawgiver because "there is a great deale of difference between good actions, that are done because God commands, and because of naturall conscience."²³ The probation of Genesis 2:16–17 is, among other things, a test of Adam's ability to discern the authority of God as the absolute commander. God tests Adam, "so the dominion and power which God had over him might be the more eminently held forth: and therefore *Adam* in this was not to consider the greatnesse or goodnesse of the matter, but the will of the commander."²⁴

²³ Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 106.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

The law considered as law manifests to Adam that God is “a sovereign Lord over him.”²⁵

The absolute character of the will of God is clearly revealed in the probation given to Adam. When God chooses to command, even when from the human perspective that command appears “arbitrary,” he alone has the power to order people to obey him. The first revelation of this supreme power to command is Genesis 2:17: “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” In his consideration of this command as mere law, Burgess observes that “the object of this command is not a thing good or bad in its own nature, but indifferent, and only evil because prohibited.”²⁶ The explanation he then gives as to why God would arrange his relationship with the creature in this way is “that hereby Gods dominion and power over man might be the more acknowledged.”²⁷ This arrangement reveals to man the supreme authority of God over him as lawgiver. Or, as Burgess illustrates the point, “when God made this world as a great house, he puts man into it as his tenant; and by this tryall of obedience, he must acknowledge his Land-lord.”²⁸ The absolute nature of the will of God is established in consideration of his unique authority to command obedience from his creatures. He alone is the sovereign ruler of his creation.

2. Law Given to Adam as Covenant

When one considers the same law of God from a different perspective, from the perspective of the law as a covenant, we find a different set of attributes revealed therein. The character of God as a gracious, loving Father who cares tenderly for his children is made plain when one considers the covenantal context of the law given to Adam and later to Moses.²⁹ It is important to recognize that Burgess does not say some laws reveal God’s majesty and power while others reveal his grace and mercy. It is the same law considered from different perspectives that reveal various attributes of the one God. The law of God is like a precious stone reflecting the wisdom

²⁵ Ibid., 122.

²⁶ Ibid., 104.

²⁷ Ibid., 106.

²⁸ Ibid., 104.

²⁹ For discussion of the issues involved here, see Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 2:117; John Murray, “Covenant Theology,” *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1982), 4:216–40; and “The Adamic Administration,” *Collected Writings*, 2:49; and David B. McWilliams, “The Covenant Theology of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and Recent Criticism,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991): 109–24.

of the jeweler in many directions simultaneously. The diversity and unity of God are preserved in Burgess's reflections about the law of God.

The basic thrust of Burgess's concern is to demonstrate that the relationship between God and Adam prior to the fall was in no way merely legal in character. There is an obligation imposed upon Adam simply because he is created in the image of God. Law in this sense emanates from the character of God as supreme ruler, but that is not the only perspective from which Adam relates to God. Adam primarily relates to God as he condescends in his kindness to his creature. This is evident in the fact that although Burgess defends the traditional terminology of "covenant of works," he also calls the prelapsarian relationship a "covenant of friendship."³⁰ Furthermore, he makes it plain that the context in which God comes to Adam with a positive law is not merely as law-giving master but primarily "as a loving God."³¹ He goes on to say that "God, who entred into this Covenant with him, is to be considered as already pleased, and a friend with him, not as a reconciled Father through Christ."³² Thus, the prelapsarian relationship reveals the kindness and care of God, as well as his power and authority.

At the outset of his discussion of the covenantal aspect of the law given to Adam, Burgess says that the law as a law and the law as a covenant "arise from different grounds."³³ As we have already seen, the law as law arises from God as supreme ruler of the universe. The law considered as a covenant, however, "ariseth from the love and goodnesse of God, whereby he doth sweeten and mollifie that power of his, and ingageth himself to reward that obedience, which were otherwise due, though God should never recompence it."³⁴ It is this covenantal condescension on the part of God that reveals him to be "a loving God."³⁵ God's dealing with man in a covenant way is "a mercifull condescension on Gods part" which "confirmed our hope in him."³⁶

The covenantal arrangement is structured in such a way

*that God might hereby sweeten and indeare himself to us. For, whereas he might require all obedience from us, and annihilate us at last, or at least not vouchsafe heaven and everlasting happinesse; to shew how good and loving he is, he will reward that most bountifully, which is otherwise due to him.*³⁷

³⁰ Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 259.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 122.

³² *Ibid.*, 129.

³³ *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Burgess urges the use of this truth upon his readers saying they ought

to admire with thankfulnesse Gods way of dealing with us his creatures, that he condescends to a promise-way, to a covenant-way. There is no naturall or Morall necessity that God should doe thus. We are his, and he might require an obedience, without any covenanting: but yet, to shew his love and goodnesse, he condescends to this way.³⁸

God's relating to Adam by way of both natural and positive law reveals the absolute character of his will and authority, and his condescending kindness and mercy. Herein one sees the brilliance of the simple statement found in the Westminster Confession of Faith 19.1, "God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works."³⁹ This statement covers a broad stretch of the theological landscape with striking brevity. "God gave to Adam a law," revealing his transcendent, absolute power; "as a covenant of works," revealing his filial love and kindness toward his creatures.

3. *The Law Given to Moses*

When God's covenant is dramatically renewed with Israel through Moses at Sinai, Burgess argues that the same complex of attributes is again revealed. When one considers the drama of Sinai, there is without question a revelation of the majesty and power of the lawgiver. The glory of the theophany at Sinai was such that "the people might be raised up to fear, and reverence the Law-giver."⁴⁰ The smoke and fire "was to shew the incomprehensible Majesty of God," and it "did signifie his glorious splendour."⁴¹ The absolute power and authority of the person and will of God are underscored in the Sinai theophany.

All, however, is not terror on the top of the mountain. In this same theophanic revelation of law, God again condescends graciously to his people, reaffirming the covenant of grace. In this covenant God gives himself to his people: "I will be your God, and you will be my people."⁴² Burgess argues that "God did not deale at this time [Sinai], as absolutely considered, but as their God and Father."⁴³ God is dealing at Sinai with a sinful people. He offers himself to them and calls them to be his own. Thus, Burgess asks,

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 131.

³⁹ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (1931; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 3:640.

⁴⁰ Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 156.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁴² See Deut 7:6; Jer 31:31–34; 24:7.

⁴³ Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 234.

“unlesse this were a covenant of grace, how could God be their God, who were sinners?”⁴⁴

That the law given to Moses was a covenant cannot be disputed, since it is expressly called such in the Scriptures (2 Kgs 18:12; Deut 17:2; 2 Chr 6:11; Jer 11:2–4; 2 Cor 3:6). The real properties of a covenant are also present, namely, mutual consent, stipulations of blessing and cursing, and the giving of a sign.⁴⁵ The only remaining question, he says, is the nature of this covenant: “Some (as you have heard) make it a Covenant of workes, others a mixt Covenant, some a subservient Covenant; but I am perswaded to goe with those who hold it to be a Covenant of grace.”⁴⁶ One can see that it is a covenant of grace and not works, he argues, if one reads Sinai in the broad context of the whole of Scripture:

The Law (as to this purpose) may be considered more largely, as that whole doctrine delivered on Mount Sinai, with the preface and promises adjoynd, and all things that may be reduced to it; or more strictly, as it is an abstracted rule of righteousness, holding forth life upon no termes, but perfect obedience. Now take it in the former sense, it was a Covenant of grace; take it in the later sense, as abstracted from *Moses* his administration of it, and so it was not of grace, but workes.⁴⁷

Burgess offers as further evidence of grace the fact that after Moses breaks the tables of the law, “God causeth the ten Commandments to be written again for them, implying that these may very well stand with a Covenant of grace.”⁴⁸

The law given to Moses is a covenant of grace that reveals the gracious character of God because it ultimately has Christ as its scope. Again, he says of the revelation at Sinai, “If you take these things absolutely they are lookt upon as mercies; yea, and applyed to Christ. And it is made a wonderful mercy to them that God did thus familiarly reveale himselfe to them.”⁴⁹ He asks, “What is the meaning of the first Commandment, but to have one God in Christ our God by faith? ... Must not the meaning then be, to love, and delight in God, and to trust in him? But how can this be without faith through Christ?”⁵⁰ The whole ceremonial system, which is in Burgess’s mind reducible to the moral law, has a view to the revelation of Christ and

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 230–31.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 232.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 233.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 162.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 157.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 235.

grace: “Now we all know that the Sacrifices were evangelicall, and did hold forth remission of sinns through the blood of Christ.”⁵¹ Elsewhere, in speaking of Luke 16:16, which many believe to advocate the total abrogation of the law, he says, “The meaning is, that the Law, in respect of the typicall part of it, as it did shadow forth, and prefigure a Christ, so it was to cease. Therefore the Law and the Prophets are put together, as agreeing in one general thing, which is, to foretell of Christ, and to typifie him.”⁵²

It is very important to recognize that God in the giving of the law actually *intends* to show forth Christ. The law, “as it was given by *Moses*, it did directly and properly intend Christ.”⁵³ The law cannot be understood properly apart from this divine intention:

God when he gave the Law to the people of Israel, did intend that the sense of their impossibility to keep it, and infinite danger accrewing thereby to them, should make them desire and seek out for Christ. ... Whatsoever the Law commanded, promised, or threatened, it was to stir up the Israelites unto Christ. ... Christ was the scope and end of intention.⁵⁴

Jesus Christ is the end of the law in that “[in] Christ he hath brought about this intent of the Law, that we should be justified, and have life.”⁵⁵ The satisfaction of the law in the obedience of Christ (both active and passive) and the redemption accomplished thereby reveals the kindness, wisdom, and mercy of God. Speaking elsewhere of Christ’s keeping of the law, he says it was, “a mercifull condescension of the Law-giver by his goodnesse and wisdome to finde out an expedient, or happy temperament: So that the Law might be satisfied, yet man finde mercy.”⁵⁶ If this law is considered in its redemptive-historical/canonical context, or what he calls its “broad sense,” it clearly points to Jesus Christ and his benefits as a revelation of the grace and mercy of God. Thus, the revelation of law in Scripture can only be properly understood by a canonical reading of the whole of redemptive history. According to Burgess, it is only the revelation of Christ that provides the needed hermeneutical key for a clear understanding of the law in the Old Testament.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 223–24.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 272.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 266–67.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 270.

⁵⁶ Burgess, *The True Doctrine of Justification*, 2:84. In this same context he says that in the work of Christ “the wise God hath therefore so ordered it, that these should be eminent demonstrations both of his Mercy and Justice” (Burgess, *True Doctrine of Justification*, 2:85).

IV. *The Law of God and the Image of God*

Closely related to the law of God in Burgess's theology is the image of God in human beings. The relationship between law and image serves as the presupposition upon which he argues for the perpetuity of the moral law. For him the exposition of the image of God is found in the moral law of God, both of which are grounded in the being of God. His working assumption is that the moral law is nothing less than a transcript of the holiness of God himself.

Adam was created in the image of God, but how are we to understand that image? The definition of the image of God is, of course, no simple question in the history of theology. For Burgess the image of God in Adam and Eve before the fall is understood through the restoration of that image in redemption. Thus, he reasons back from Ephesians 4:24 that the image of God in Adam is "principally and chiefly ... placed in righteousness and holiness."⁵⁷ The righteousness and holiness in view here are not an abstract, amorphous morality lacking specificity. It is defined in the history of redemption by the Ten Commandments, as they are a transcript of the holiness of God himself. The law "shadowed forth the excellent and holy nature of God. ... Its nothing but an expression and draught of that great purity which is in his nature that pure and excellent image of Gods holiness."⁵⁸ Thus, regeneration is defined in terms of this holy law as well: "What is Regeneration, but the writing of the Morall Law in thy heart?"⁵⁹

This line of reasoning is made clearer in Burgess's work on the doctrine of justification. There he discusses at some length the righteousness of God and man in relation to the law. He explains that one way to define the righteousness of men is "conformity of the whole man to God's law."⁶⁰ Conformity to the law is holiness. He then relates this to Adam saying, "This righteousness *Adam* was created in, and is called the image of God."⁶¹ The image of God is defined by the revealed will of God contained in the law of God. He reasons that, "the will of God revealed is the ectypal or copy of that original, so that if we would judge whether an action be righteous, or a person righteous, we must gather it by his conformity to the Law of God."⁶² Elsewhere in the same work he describes the law as "an idea and

⁵⁷ Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 114.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 151–53.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 201, cf. 205.

⁶⁰ Burgess, *The True Doctrine of Justification*, 2:20.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 2:21.

representation of the glorious nature of God.”⁶³ The image of God is righteousness and holiness defined by the revealed law of God, which is “summarily comprehended in the ten commandments.”⁶⁴

It is precisely this law that Adam had “written on the heart.” This expression is sometimes misunderstood to mean that Adam was given the Ten Commandments *in the particular form* in which they were later given to Moses at Sinai. However, as Patrick Fairbairn explains, this language

was a brief and popular style of speech, intimating that by the constitution of his spiritual nature, taken in connection with the circumstances in which he was placed, he was bound, and knew that he was bound, to act according to the spirit and tenor of what was afterwards formally set forth in the ten commandments.⁶⁵

It is in this light that we should understand the Westminster Confession’s statement in 19.2: “This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments.”⁶⁶ The Confession is not saying that the Ten Commandments were revealed to Adam in the garden *in the exact form they were given at Sinai*; rather, it is affirming that the principles later revealed in the Decalogue were written on the heart of Adam, which is a vital dimension of his being made in the image of God.

Man as image of God at creation is constituted to reflect the moral character of God summarized later in the Decalogue; which law, because it is grounded in the character of God, must be perpetually binding. This is the foundational assumption upon which he argues for the perpetuity of the moral law. Burgess concludes that the moral law in some form was always preached in the church of God. “The church of God,” he says, “never was, nor ever shall be without this law. . . . So that we may say, the Decalogue is *Adams*, and *Abrahams*, and *Noahs*, and *Christ*s, and the *Apostles*, as well as of *Moses*.”⁶⁷ This law is “a perpetuall means and instrument which God hath used in his Church for information of duty, conviction of sin, and exhortation to all holiness.”⁶⁸ Thus, when it came to Moses, it was written “upon tables of stone, to shew the perpetuity, and stability of it.”⁶⁹ The image of God is to be interpreted in view of the later revelation of the moral

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 2:180.

⁶⁴ Westminster Shorter Catechism 41 (Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:684).

⁶⁵ Patrick Fairbairn, *The Revelation of Law in Scripture* (1869; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1996), 46.

⁶⁶ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:640.

⁶⁷ Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 150.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

law at Sinai. This factor grounds his argument for the perpetually binding character of the moral law.

V. The Law of God and the Glory of God

This perpetual moral law is a sustained revelation of the glory of God. Although there is no explicit discussion of the relationship between the glory of God and the Law of God in *Vindiciae Legis*, Burgess does at points make that connection plain. In speaking of the entire history of the giving of the law to Israel, he says that “God did put glory upon it.”⁷⁰ It becomes clear in what follows that by “glory” here he means the majesty, power, and authority of God that invokes fear in the people of God.⁷¹ Elsewhere he seems to equate glory simply with honor. In arguing for capital punishment under the new covenant, he says that although “we are indeed to labour for the meeknes and patience of a Christian, yet we are not to forget zeale for Gods glory.”⁷² Zeal for the glory of God is equated with enforcing the law of God and thus defending the honor of God among men. In arguing for the superior excellence of the ministry of the gospel over the law, he reasons, “God caused some materiall glory to shine upon *Moses*, while he gave the Law, hereby to procure the greater authority and majesty to the Law; but that glory which cometh by the Gospel is spirituall, and far more transcendent, bringing us at last into eternall glory.”⁷³ The visible manifestation of glory in the face of Moses when he received the law “doth signifie the glory and excellency of the Law, as in respect of Gods counsells and intentions.”⁷⁴ He goes on to make clear that the ultimate intention of God was to reveal the spiritual glories of Christ and his gospel. “The glory of the law,” Burgess says, “was Christ.... Christ was in some measure a glorious object in the administration of the Law.”⁷⁵ It is the inclusion of the Christ-directed intention of the law in the divine economy of redemption that gives it its glorious character. The law in its “broad sense” is a revelation of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 154–58.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 190.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 268–69.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 269.

Conclusions

For Burgess, the law of God is a comprehensive guide to the character of God. The moral law of God is a transcript of the holiness of God. It is in fact a portrait in which God has “painted out his own nature.” Considered as a covenant-law, either with Adam (written on his heart) or with Moses, the law is a revelation of the majestic transcendence and the condescending kindness of God. The law can be viewed from various perspectives (i.e., as mere rule or as a covenant). Read as mere rule, the moral law is a revelation of the sovereign power and exclusive authority of the will of God. Read as a covenant; it is a revelation of the personal, fatherly care of God for his people. Because the moral law is a transcript of the image of God, revealing the glory of God, it cannot be abrogated. To do away with this law God would have to violate his own character and destroy the very image of God in man. For Burgess, law is never an abstract principle. It is always personal because it is vitally dependent upon the person of the lawgiver.

In recent years, there has been a renewal of interest in and reflection upon the concept of natural law within the Reformed community.⁷⁶ There are a host of related biblical and theological issues that have been and are being addressed and debated. Here the relevance of Burgess’s lectures is transparent, for one dimension of this conversation is related to how the confessional standards of the Reformed churches understood the idea of natural law or “the light of nature” as it is denoted in the Westminster Confession.⁷⁷ Works like *Vindiciae Legis*, written by those who assisted in the drafting of the Confession, are an invaluable resource for a proper understanding and interpretation of that document and its language. We must be careful not to impose our own assumptions upon writers of the past but allow them to interpret their language and expressions for themselves.

Burgess’s lectures clarify, for example, that when the Westminster Standards speak of the light of nature, that light is never divorced from the God

⁷⁶ Stephen J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010); *A Biblical Case for Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: Acton Institute, 2006); Brian Estelle, John V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen, eds., *The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009); Ryan C. McIlhenny, ed., *Kingdoms Apart: Engaging Two Kingdoms Perspective* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2012).

⁷⁷ Westminster Confession of Faith 1.1, 6; 10.4; 20.4; 21.1. John V. Fesko and Guy M. Richard, “Natural Theology and the Westminster Confession of Faith,” in Ligon Duncan, ed., *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century* (Ross-Shire: Christian Focus, 2009), 3:223–66.

of nature. The light or law of nature is the personal revelation-speech of the God who “enlightens every man” (John 1:9). Natural law is always seated in the context of the historical-revelational-redemptive purposes of God in the world and for his people. It speaks to human beings of the holy character of God and leaves all people “without excuse” for their rebellion (Rom 1:20) because in it human beings are being personally addressed by their creator. Thus, natural law is not merely the knowledge of right and wrong or abstract moral principles but the personal knowledge of God himself (Rom 1:21). It is the knowledge of God the lawgiver that is suppressed in unrighteousness, which is why all human beings are without excuse for their rebellion against him (Rom 1:20). Ignorance and blindness are culpable and self-imposed.

Therefore, we must be careful to guard against any notion of natural law as a neutral territory wherein believers and unbelievers share common values or judgments in our cultural endeavors, though at times there may be a surface agreement between them. It is undoubtedly true, as Burgess asserts, that the manifestation of the light of nature in the unbeliever is seen “1. By [their] making good and wholesome lawes to govern men by; and 2. By their practice, at least of some of them, according to those lawes.”⁷⁸ However, this is a manifestation of God’s common grace, as they are “done by the help of God.”⁷⁹ The reality of this common grace does not eradicate the suppression of truth in unrighteousness or the blindness of the unbelieving heart. Even in the realm of civil life, there are severe limitations on how far the redeemed and unredeemed can walk together. The Canons of Dort capture well what we find in the teaching of Burgess when they explain that

there is, to be sure, a certain light of nature remaining in all people after the fall, by virtue of which they retain some notions about God, natural things, and the difference between what is moral and immoral, and demonstrate a certain eagerness for virtue and for good outward behavior. But this light of nature is far from enabling humans to come to a saving knowledge of God and conversion to him—so far, in fact, that they do not use it rightly *even in matters of nature and society*. (Third Main Point, Article 4, emphasis added)⁸⁰

In short, natural law or the light of nature in the Westminster Confession of Faith is natural revelation. If we lose sight of this foundational reference

⁷⁸ Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis*, 60.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

⁸⁰ “Canons of Dort,” Reformed Church in America, 2017, <https://rca.org/resources/canons-dort>. For a fuller outworking of these principles, see Daniel Strange, “Not Ashamed: The Sufficiency of Scripture for Public Theology,” *Themelios* 36.2 (2011): 238–60.

point, we can quickly fall into a conception of law as an abstraction independent of the creator and giver of it. Such an abstraction inevitably leads to a distortion of God's law as revealed in both Scripture and nature. As the Psalmist in Psalm 19 makes plain, general revelation and special revelation are interdependent. The person redeemed in Christ by the latter's fulfillment of the law is enabled by grace to sing with the Psalmist both that "the heavens declare the glory of God" (v. 1) and that "the law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul" (v. 7). Natural law in the heavens and revealed law in the Scriptures are two verses of one great song of the creator God whose voice cannot ultimately be muted. All human beings hear and respond to God the lawgiver either with glad submission or in bitter rebellion. Only when God's law is received through Christ and his fulfillment of it are we able to say with the Psalmist, "Oh, how I love your law" (Ps 119:97).