

Divine Ordinances and Natural Rights

In his discussion on the marriage of priests in the Apology, Melanchthon claims that our natural, human rights are established by God's ordinances in creation (Ap XXIII, 7-12). His ordinances are the decrees that institute and maintain right order for life on earth. Thus natural rights are built into the natural order of the created world. Since that is so, human regulations cannot abolish any natural right, such as the union of a man and woman in marriage. Only God can override or change our natural rights. He concludes (Ap XXIII, 12): "Natural right is really divine right, because it is an ordinance divinely stamped on nature."

By the decrees, recorded in Genesis 1 and elsewhere, God still orders the world for human life and maintains human life. By His powerful utterances in Genesis 1:3, 6 and 9 He creates the order that is needed for life to flourish on earth. By His decree in Genesis 1:11 the earth produces vegetation. By His word of blessing to Adam and Eve in 1:20a He enables them and their descendants to procreate. By His mandate for Adam and Eve in 1:20b He commissions them to rule over the earth as co-workers with Him. By His mandate in 1:29 He provides food for them from the plants and trees.

These creative decrees that were once spoken at the beginning are still in force; they remain said. They do what they say. So if God should no longer say, "Let there be light," the whole cosmos would become dark and chaotic, formless and void, unfit for life and growth; through them God maintains the conditions for life on earth. They create and uphold His order for human life and for the reception of God's earthly blessings. These divine ordinances sustain God's good order in creation, the order for the transmission of His blessings. Melanchthon rightly notes: "The Word of God formed human nature in such a way that it may be fruitful not only at the beginning of creation but as long as this physical nature of ours exists. Likewise, the earth became fruitful by this Word [Gen 1:11]: 'Let the earth put forth vegetation; plants yielding seed.' Because of this ordinance, the earth commenced to produce plants not only in the beginning, but yearly the fields are clothed as long as this natural order exists" (Ap XXIII, 8). By His declaration in 2:18 He also establishes and maintains the conjugal union of husband and wife in marriage.

The same pattern continues after the fall. In response to Noah's burnt offering after the flood in 8:21-22 the Lord decrees that He will maintain the good order for human life on earth with the agricultural cycle of seedtime and harvest, the meteorological cycle of hot and cold weather, the seasonal cycle of summer and winter, and the work cycle of day and night. By His decree in 9:6 He protects human life from destruction by animals and other people; by His covenant in 9:8-16 with Noah and all his descendants, He declares that He will never again destroy animal and human life on earth with another flood. All these divine utterances remain in force until the end of the world; through them God maintains bodily life on earth. They establish and maintain our human rights.

God defends these basic human rights through His law, natural law that is summarised in the second table of the Decalogue. He protects the good gifts that He provides for humankind and the right order by which He delivers them to all people on earth - parents and family, physical life and good health, sexual intercourse and marriage, money and property, justice and a good reputation, the household as an economic unit and its physical assets. By His law He curbs social disorder and maintains the order that is necessary for a fruitful human life on earth.

Even though the descendants of Adam turn from God and spurn Him, He still offers a fruitful life to them in the order of creation. So if they are law-abiding people who respect God's order for the world and human society, they enjoy His earthly blessings. The promise attached to the fourth commandment applies to them; it will be well with them and they will live long on the earth (Deut. 5:16). They will have good lives with good families, good marriages, and good communities. They will be able to do good work in order to provide for others and look after the natural world that sustains them. They will be able to enjoy food and drink and all the other good things that God so richly provides for their bodily enjoyment (1 Tim 6:17).

But all that depends on their respect for the life-giving, life-sustaining order by which God delivers these temporal blessings to them. His ordinances give them their rights.