

## A Review of David Haines' *Natural Theology*

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**Book:** David Haines, *Natural Theology: A Biblical and Historical Introduction and Defense* (Landrum, SC: The Davenant Press, 2021)

What is “natural theology”? The rise of presuppositionalism in 20<sup>th</sup> century Reformed thought has resulted in the rejection of any form of natural theology. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century however, a focus on *ressourcement* resulting in a “recovery” of Thomism and Classical Theism has come with a “recovery” of natural theology and of course classical apologetics. In this light, David Haines has written a book seeking to “recover” and promote natural theology, asserting that natural theology has always been the Christian position and that the 20<sup>th</sup> century American Reformed church as a whole was wrong in rejecting it.

Haines' book begins with an introduction where he defines “natural theology.” Subsequently, part one deals with the supposed biblical foundations of natural theology, while part two traces this embrace of natural theology in history from the pre-Socratics to the early church fathers, to Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Protestant theologians from the 1500s to 1700s. Haines then responds to some objections to natural theology then concludes his book, with the confidence that he has proven that natural theology is indeed the historic Christian view.

This book is a promotion and defense of Natural Theology from Scripture and history. My review will address the issue of natural theology on both fronts. I will look at the definition of Natural Theology, move to an examination of the biblical passages, look at history, and then discuss the issues at hand. My main point of contention is that the biblical passages do not actually support natural theology, and that Haines has conflated the idea of general revelation with natural theology, both conceptually and in some of the historical sources he looks at.

### What is Natural Theology?

According to Haines, “natural theology” is “that part of *philosophy* which explores that which man can know about God (His existence, divine nature, etc.) from nature alone via man’s divinely bestowed faculty of reason, unaided by special revelation from any religion, and without presupposing the truth of any religion” (p. 12). Haines differentiates “natural theology” from “natural revelation,” which is stated as the “raw material and source data” for natural theology (p. 12). He also differentiates it from “natural religion,” which is the “historical attempt ... to make that which can be known of God via natural revelation into a religion in its own right” (pp. 14-5).

In Reformed theology, we normally speak of General versus Special Revelation. Revelation implies that both come from God. General Revelation is a revelation given by God to all men.<sup>1</sup> Having its *locus classicus* in Romans 1: 18-21, it is a revelation unto condemnation, showing forth the existence and glory of God which Man rejects. The mode of such revelation is nature and conscience, encompassing natural law in its judgment against sinners (Rom. 2:15-16).

As it would be seen, natural theology lays claim to many of the texts General Revelation uses. However, the two concepts are not the same. Natural theology is cognitive in nature. It utilizes “the faculty of reason” to derive truths about God apart from special revelation. General Revelation on the other hand is non cognitive in nature, since it is given to all men, and most men in the world are not philosophers. Natural theology also claims that it can arrive at definite truths about God apart from special revelation, while general revelation asserts that, apart from “God’s eternal power and divine nature,” that is impossible.<sup>2</sup>

Natural theology therefore, as opposed to General Revelation, states that unregenerate men can attain to certain truths concerning God through rigorous reflections upon nature and the world. But there is more. Not only are such truths attainable by the unregenerate mind, they are necessary to be known by the regenerate in order that they may correctly think of God. As Haines writes, “natural theology is a precondition for proper biblical interpretation” (p. 21)

The differences between natural theology and general revelation can be seen as follows:

	<b>Natural Theology</b>	<b>General Revelation</b>
Process of gaining knowledge:	Cognitive	Primarily non-cognitive; intuitive ( <i>sensus divinitatis</i> )
Nature of knowledge:	Certain if reasoned correctly	Tentative and uncertain (as it is not cognitive)
Scope:	Available to all, but only accessible to philosophers	Given and perceptible to all, but rejected due to sin
Regeneration required to understand it?	No, unbelievers can gain it	Yes, only the regenerate mind can correctly understand it although all have it <sup>3</sup>
Required to correctly understand Scripture?	Yes	No

<sup>1</sup> “This revelation of God is general, perceptible as such, and intelligible to every human” [Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* (ed. John Bolt; trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:310]

<sup>2</sup> “... the knowledge that general revelation can supply is not only meager and inadequate but also uncertain, consistently mingled with error,” (Bavinck, 1:313)

<sup>3</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology: Prolegomena and the Doctrine of Revelation, Scripture, and God* (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.; ed. William Edgar; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974, 2007), 138

Since the Reformed teaching of General Revelation has some overlap with and appeal to the same texts as that Haines used for natural theology, the onus is Haines is to show that the distinctives of natural theology is actually taught in Scripture and in history. It is to these we now look.

## **An analysis of the biblical texts**

### Psalms 9:1-4

The heavens declare the glory of God,  
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.  
Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge.  
There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard.  
Their voice goes out through all the earth,  
and their words to the end of the world. (Ps. 9:1-4)

This passage clearly states that the revelation of God given through nature is voiceless (“no speech”). In other words, it would seem to give greater credence to the doctrine of General Revelation rather than natural theology. Haines’ interpretation through citing John Calvin (pp. 27-30) does not give us a reason to prefer natural theology over general revelation.

### Acts 14:15-17

Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness. (Acts 14:15-17)

According to Haines, these verses made plain that God has clearly revealed Himself in creation (“not without witness”), and that such truths about God “can be known through a rational observation of creation” (p. 32). When we read these verses, it is clear that Haines’ first observation is correct, but his second one is not. Paul and Barnabas were not telling the pagans at Lystra that their error was in not actually being rational enough to deduce the truths concerning God. Rather, Paul and Barnabas were declaring to them an “alien God” who is the Creator of the heavens and earth, totally unlike their pagan deities. Paul and Barnabas did appeal to creation, but only to indict them for their ungratefulness to the Creator. In other words, this was a Gospel presentation with an appeal to natural law principles, not an appeal to rational inquiry through the “truths” of natural theology.

Haines asserts here that there is “an ability of unregenerate humans to understand both the content and consequences of what is revealed of God in nature” (p. 33). However, natural knowledge (which everyone agrees with) is not the same as natural theology and should not be conflated with it. We can agree that the pagans of Lystra are able to apprehend Paul’s and Barnabas’ message, but we are given no reason to believe they would agree with it at all, much less think it as rational.

### Acts 17:26-27

And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ... (Acts 17:26-7)

Paul’s speech at Mars Hill seems to give lots of material for the promotion of natural theology. Among other things, Paul appeals to pagan poets and philosophy (Acts 17:28), and appeals to the logical implication of what the Greeks do know in his promotion of biblical monotheism (Acts 17:25, 28, 29; p. 36). Is Paul actually saying that the Greeks have come unto true knowledge of God through reason alone?

We note here that General Revelation does not say that the natural man cannot stumble unto true things, for even a broken analogue clock is right twice per day. However, General Revelation asserts that one cannot be certain about any truths that one gets through reason. When we come to a passage like Acts 17, does the passage better fit that of natural theology, or that of general revelation?

Here, we note the fact that Paul’s proclamation is one that polemically marshals Greek sources in indicting the Athenians of idolatry, that though they have certain glimpses of truth, they did not actually believe them to be true and follow through with them. In other words, for Paul, the Greeks were indeed superstitious (δεισιδαίμων).<sup>4</sup> We note further that the truths seemingly cited by Paul that the pagans had [that God needed nothing but is instead the Giver of all good things (Acts 17:25), that God is the principle behind all men (Acts 17:28a) and that God creates all men (Acts 17:28b)] are not undisputed truths in Greek philosophy. In other words, just as Platonism believed in an immutable One while Heraclitus and Greek religion believe in mutable gods, therefore since Greek philosophy and religion covers both ends of the spectrum on such matters, the Christian view would most certainly coincide with elements of Greek thought. That does not however imply that Greek thought is indeed proper natural theology, only that due to the

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<sup>44</sup> C.f. John Calvin, *Commentary on Acts* (Volume 2). Accessed on CCEL at <https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom37/calcom37.v.v.html> (Feb 2, 2022). Some commenters have taken it with more positive connotation, “very religious,” and it could mean that. In context, it was an ambiguous term that might seem to commend the Athenians but had a dual meaning that actually exposes their idolatry [see John B. Polhill, *Acts* (New American Commentary; Logos version)]. Therefore, while it might seem to commend the Athenians, Paul actually intends to make the point that they are superstitious.

breadth of Greek thought, there would be points of contact between Christianity and Greek philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

The key thing to take away from Paul's Mars Hill speech in Acts 17 is that Paul did not look favorably at their religion. Most importantly, Paul's key point was to indict them of idolatry instead of commending the knowledge some of their philosophers and poets had stumbled upon. Paul's encounter at Mars Hill can be summed up as follows: The wisest of Man's wisdom can figure out all spectrums of a position such that the Christian position would be touched on, yet the wisest of Man's wisdom is unable to bring man to embrace the truth and come even one step closer to God.

Haines' interpretation of Acts 17:26-27 is therefore in error, primarily because he fails to distinguish between "able to touch on the Christian position" with "come to some knowledge of [God] through their rational observations of the sensible universe" (p. 34). Haines fail to make the necessary connection between the two, and therefore his interpretation of Acts 17:26-27 fails to establish the supposed presence of natural theology.

#### Romans 1:19-20

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (Rom. 1:19-20)

Haines asserts that this passage clearly teaches that Man truly know God. That of course is true. However, Haines fails to differentiate between cognitive and non-cognitive knowing. General revelation asserts the latter while natural theology asserts the former. In failing to differentiating the two ways of knowing, Haines continues to claim the presence of natural theology in the texts of Scripture without actually proving that what is present is merely General Revelation and not Natural Theology.

Interestingly enough, part of Haines' interpretation of Romans 1:19-20 is a critique of Cornelius Van Til's supposed interpretation of Romans 1:19-20. According to Haines, Van Til states that "the rejection of the knowledge of God to which Romans 1:18-20:1 refers and for which men are held responsible happened at the Fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden" (p. 37). Haines cites Van Til's *An Introduction of Systematic Theology* here. I have a later version of the work and am unable to find the quote cited by Haines,

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<sup>5</sup> This became a blessing to the Western Church, one that is not available to most of the rest of the world until modern times. The non-universality of Greco-Roman thought is one more reason why natural theology is false.

but it can be clearly seen from Van Til's work that Haines has misrepresented him on the matter.

In Van Til's thought, revelation can be split into the knowledge of nature, about man himself, and about God, and each of them can be seen from nature, self, and God.<sup>6</sup> With regards to General Revelation as it relates to our subject matter, we look at knowledge of nature from nature, knowledge of man from nature and from man, and knowledge of God. As it more narrowly relates to Van Til's interpretation of Romans 1:19-20, we can see that Haines' interpretation is false. Concerning knowledge of nature from nature, we see Van Til's citation of Romans 1:18 as showing forth the *present* reality of the natural law.<sup>7</sup> On the knowledge of man from man, Van Til cites Romans 1:19 in speaking about the *current* reality of God's revelation within Man.<sup>8</sup> Van Til therefore does not deny the continual reality of revelation in Romans 1:19-20. Rather, for Van Til, Romans 1:19-20 does not establish a cognitive revelation of God and nature, only an intuitive one, even a transcendental one.<sup>9</sup>

### Romans 1:32 and 2:14-15

Both passages deal with the existence of the natural law, which nobody in the Reformed tradition denies. However, natural law is not the same thing as natural theology, and therefore Haines' arguments here are moot.

### **An analysis of the historical evidence**

Haines does shine in his analysis of the historical evidence, as it is clear that the pre-Socratics all the way to the Reformed Scholastics believe in some form of Natural Theology. As he deals with the Reformed tradition however, I will dispute that there is a strict continuity between what came before the Reformed and what came after the Reformation. The dispute concerns how the Reformed argument on natural theology is framed, and whether the historic Reformed view on "natural theology" is the same as Haines' view.

When discussing the Reformed from 1500 to 1700, the Reformers and the Reformed Scholastics, Haines admitted that "there was some debate amongst the Reformed theologians about what to do with the 'sense of divinity,'" asking "was this an innate idea of God, or a natural tendency of human reason towards

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<sup>6</sup> Van Til, 121-2

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 140

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 160

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 160-1. For Van Til, strictly speaking, intuition applies only to knowledge about man from man. However, looking at Van Til's use of "natural theology" (knowledge about God from nature and man), we can see that such is not really knowledge about God as it is a theistic undermining of natural theology towards the Christian faith, a position I will argue for later.

recognizing that God exists” (p. 152). Haines however dismissed the question as being of no consequence concerning the presence of natural theology (p. 153), yet the debate over the question is actually very important, as it informs us on their view of what constitutes “natural theology.”

In considering the mature Reformed Scholastic position on “natural theology,” we can look at Francis Turretin. As cited by Haines, Turretin teaches that there is a natural theology that is partly innate and partly acquired.<sup>10</sup> Turretin however says more about “natural theology” than that. According to Turretin, “natural theology” is found in the conscience<sup>11</sup> and universal experience.<sup>12</sup> “Natural theology” is found even in savage brutes.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps most surprising of all, according to Turretin, “the mind of man is a *tabula rasa* not absolutely ... but not as to apprehensive and intuitive knowledge.”<sup>14</sup>

Turretin’s view of “natural theology” therefore is not the same as Haines’ view of “natural theology.” Rather, Turretin’s view of “natural theology” seems to be a combination of a medieval view of natural theology with the Reformed view of General Revelation. The medieval view of natural theology is that men can put forward reasonable arguments for God from nature. It however does not say anything about whether men can come to know God from reason alone (Haines’ view). Turretin’s view of “natural theology” can be seen therefore as a transitional step between the Reformed borrowing of the concept of “natural theology,” and the later Reformed rejection of the concept of “natural theology” for the more biblical concept of General Revelation. The key point to take note is that Turretin’s definition of “natural theology,” while embracing the medieval view, also embraces elements that are not part of “natural theology” proper, showing us that the Reformed Scholastic relation to “natural theology” is not just a wholesale embrace of the category, warts and all. Rather, since on this view there were no prior sharp disagreements with Roman Catholicism, what most likely happened is that it took time for these views to be reformed to bring them closer to what the Scripture actually teaches.

## **Natural Law, Natural Theology and General Revelation**

The main problem therefore of Haines’ approach to the issue is his failure to differentiate between the related concepts “natural law,” “natural theology,” and “general revelation.” Indeed, Haines does not seem to want to engage more modern Reformed theologians on the matter except for Cornelius Van Til, as if Van Til’s rejection of natural theology is unique to him and his followers. The fact of the matter is that 20<sup>th</sup> century Reformed Theology in general was shifting away from all forms of “natural theology,” and Van Til

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<sup>10</sup> Haines, 158. Citing Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1:3: IV (Haines erroneously citing it as 1:611-3). This version Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (trans. George Musgrave Giger; ed. James T Dennison Jr.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:3: V

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:3: VI

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.3. IX

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.3. XI

was just its most prominent advocate for such a shift, yet even Van Til was not such a “radical” on this issue as will be seen.

We have defined “general revelation” and contrasted it with Haines’ view of “natural theology.” “Natural law” is the subset of “General Revelation” that reveals the eternal Law of God. Haines ignores the concepts of “general revelation” and “natural law,” and therefore all his supposed proofs for “natural theology” fail. Until and unless Haines can show why any biblical text must support “natural theology” but does not support “general revelation” or “natural law,” Haines’ case for natural theology falls flat.

Perhaps what is more controversial is my take that General Revelation is primarily non cognitive and intuitive. Van Til only speaks of the intuitive nature of General Revelation when he deals with the knowledge of man from man. However, based upon the induction fallacy and Gödel’s incompleteness theorem, we can say that there can be no justification of knowledge apart from what is given from within. All of General Revelation therefore, even of the empirical kind, depends on intuitive revelation. Van Til was too optimistic about the ability of nature to mediate God’s revelation.

Many people like Haines think that Van Til is against natural theology. And yes, Van Til is against their idea of natural theology. However, the relation of Van Til to natural theology is not that clear cut. Van Til is not against all that is called “natural theology.” Rather, Van Til asserts that one can use “natural theology,” but the proofs of God are subverted into an overarching transcendental proof of God, where all arguments are to be used “analogously” not “univocally.”<sup>15</sup> Since the “proofs” are subverted into a transcendental argument for God, it is clear that Van Til had no use for the arguments as traditionally presented, and therefore the substance of “natural theology” is eviscerated by Van Til even as the forms are used.

Building upon both these insights, it is clear that General Revelation is intuitive in nature, and that it is tentative and uncertain. The transcendental argument, precisely because it is a **transcendental** argument, is not a General Revelation argument, but one that utilizes General Revelation as a stepping stone to point to God (and therefore its certainty does not depend on it). Whatever one’s view of the Transcendental Argument is, it is clear that Van Til’s relation with “natural theology” is a bit more nuanced than normally presented; one can even say Van Til transcended natural theology itself.<sup>16</sup>

### **Natural Theology and the Attributes of God**

As Haines’ case for Natural Theology fails, we can ask why the need for this supposed retrieval of “natural theology.” Haines himself betrays the reason when he states that natural theology “is required for the *principle of appropriate predication*” (p. 21, also p.

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<sup>15</sup> Van Til, 179-81

<sup>16</sup> My concern with the Transcendental Argument is its requirement for high abstract thinking. Gordon Clark’s approach of probing logical consistency is in my opinion a much easier approach for apologetics.



168). In other words, here we see the tail wagging the dog. In 2016, the accusation was made that certain complementarians were allowing their view of gender to influence their views on the Trinity. Here, we see a similar trend where those reacting against the supposed “heretical” views of the Trinity are letting their view of what they believe necessary for “orthodoxy” influence their view on biblical authority and theological method. Pressed on how to defend their Thomistic views of classical theism, they revert to dependance on “natural theology,” asserting that “natural theology is a precondition for proper biblical interpretation” (p. 21).

Giving some thought to this line of thinking should give us much cause for alarm. The Reformed Church has always held to the principle of *Sola Scriptura*, and thus the sufficiency of Scripture. Thomas Aquinas as a medieval Catholic, and many Thomists as Roman Catholics, do not hold to the sufficiency of Scripture, so embracing natural theology would not be an issue for them. Protestants however should have a problem with a rejection of the sufficiency of Scripture. If the price for “orthodoxy” is a denial of *Sola Scriptura*, is that a price worth paying?

The problem of course is that the assertion that natural theology is required for dealing with the attributes of God is false. Many good Reformed systematic theologies have been written since the 1700, and they neither embrace ESS (Eternal Submission of the Son) nor natural theology. Robert Reymond in his *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* for example goes through the attributes of God including immutability, impassibility and so on, **without** embracing natural theology.<sup>17</sup> This is also the case with Michael Horton and Robert Letham.<sup>18</sup>

Those promoting classical theism might very well argue that the absence of natural theology is what makes departure from classical doctrines of the Trinity possible. But that misses the whole point of what theology should be. Theology should be aiming for the truths of God’s Word. We do not determine *a priori* what our doctrine of God and the Trinity should be like. If the Reformation means anything, it means that, even when we hold to the classical doctrines of God’s immutability and others, we do it primarily because God’s Word teaches it, not because natural theology demands it! If a doctrine cannot be defended from the Word of God, either improve your exegesis of Scripture or abandon how you understand that doctrine! A failure by one to defend what one thinks is true thus resulting in a turn to natural theology is a failure to be Protestant, and a turn away from biblical Christianity.

## Conclusion

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<sup>17</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 168-203

<sup>18</sup> Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 223-72; Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 155-68

In conclusion, Haines' book is a helpful book making a modern case for natural theology. However, it fails to differentiate between "natural law," "natural theology" and "general revelation," thus failing to make the case for "natural law" from Scripture. Historically, it fails to convince as it fails to note the shift in the view of what constitutes "natural theology" in the Reformed tradition, seen especially in the writings of Francis Turretin.

Haines' book is important primarily because Thomistic classical theism seems to require an embrace of a certain form of natural theology. Unfortunately for the new Thomists, their increasingly shrill rhetoric against anyone who disagrees with their strict views of what constitutes simplicity and other attributes does not have the support of Scripture. As alluded to by Haines, without natural theology, the strict rendering of these classical attributes of God would not be supported, and the cage-stage new Thomists will then not have a leg to stand on.