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by Huldreich Zwingli

(b 1484–d. 1531)

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Sometimes the translator has indicated in italics within parentheses the original Latin word that the English translates. Brackets ([]) enclose text that is implied in the meaning of the Latin but requires added words to make sense in English. –Site Editor

“Whatever you would wish that they do to you.”

Since Christ is the reformer of created (*conditae*) nature—which was corrupted in Adam—here he touches on the foundation of the natural law. We know Paul’s judgment (*sententia*) to the Romans: “For when the gentiles who do not have the law by nature do what is of the law, although they do not have the law, they are a law for themselves; they show that the work (*opus*) of the law has been written on their hearts, etc.” In the first chapter he had also said: “That which can be known about God has been made manifest to them, for God has revealed (*patefecit*) it to them.” From these passages we plainly understand that that knowledge about God, which men say has been received into a certain “nature,” (*naturae nescio cui*) is from God (*Dei*). For God has made it manifest to them. And what else is nature than the continuous and everlasting operation of God, and his arrangement of all things? Now in this passage Paul has come somewhat close to the manner of the gentiles when they speak about God: not because he himself thinks that way (that the knowledge and law of God originate from human reason) but because the gentiles think that way, which is why he carefully adds, “For God has revealed it to them,” lest anyone think that he has this [knowledge] from himself or his own power (*viribus*). Nevertheless even all the wisest men of the gentiles (as far as I can tell) understood nature to be nothing else than the unchangeable operation and providence of the highest divinity. One can gather this easily from Seneca, Cicero, and others. For Cicero in his book *De Legibus* and *De Inventione* writes the following about the law of nature:

The law of nature is right and highest reason that has been planted in nature. It commands those things that must be done and prohibits the contrary. This is the highest law, which in all ages has come to birth

before any law was written, or before any state whatsoever was constituted. For the law of nature arose and was constituted not by opinion but by a certain inborn force (*vi*). Now all of nature is ruled by God. Among all the animals there is none except man that has knowledge of God. By this law the society of all men has been conquered. These “sparks” by nature have been given to man and made innate to him, so that we may understand that we have been born for justice and for each other’s fellowship. But through the corruption of nature, the debasement of custom, and the vanity of our thoughts, they are snuffed out, as it were. From this vices arise and gain strength, as man departs from nature. Therefore the law of nature is that which not opinion but rather a certain inborn force brings forth, that is, religion, piety, gratitude, vindication, reverence (*observantiam*), [and] truth. Religion is that which regards the fear and worship of the gods. Piety is that which admonishes us to do our duty toward our country, or parents, or others joined [to us] by blood. Gratitude is that which shows regard in remembrance and repayment of services, honors, and friendship. Vindication is that through which, by defense or by taking vengeance, we fight off violence and insult from ourselves and from those of our household (*a nostris*)—who should be dear to us—and through which we punish sins. Reverence is that through which we revere and honor those who precede us in age, wisdom, or some other dignity. Truth is that through which we take care that nothing is done, has been done, or will be done otherwise than as we have asserted.

From these passages and others in various places that are read among the Nations, I easily conclude that they had that nature and reason that we call God’s “will” or “ordinance” or sometimes even the “image” of God, which either was first engraved in men or was thereafter illuminated and renewed by the working of the Holy Spirit through faith and charity. For God is and has always been among the gentiles, whom he chose in Christ for justice and life before the foundations of the world were laid. This image of God that was imprinted on man has been quite disfigured and stained. This lamp was darkened and blotted out in the densest shadows, though it was not altogether extinguished. For even among the most impious and wicked men it shows itself and cries out against sins; and as much as it can it struggles and fights against [sins]. That most holy and orthodox man Augustine makes me surer in this judgment in his book *De Spiritu et Littera* (ch. XXVII [48] and following)[1] where he writes,

And let it not disturb [us] that Paul said that the gentiles do what belongs to the law (*quae legis sunt*) “by nature” (*naturaliter*)—not by the Spirit of God, not by faith, not by grace. For the Spirit of grace does this, in order to restore in us the image of God, in which we were made by nature. Vice is indeed contrary to nature and grace certainly heals it. Because of grace we say to God, “Have mercy on me, heal my soul because I have sinned against you!” Therefore men by nature do what belongs to the law. Those who do not do this behave (*faciunt*) viciously, and through vice the law of God is blotted out from [our] hearts. And because of this, when vice has been healed, when it is written there, “they do [the things] that belong to the law by nature,” it is not that through nature grace has been negated, but rather through grace nature has been repaired. “For through one man sin, etc.” (Rom. 5). By this grace justice is written on the renewed inner man[2] which guilt had destroyed; this is the mercy [that came] upon the human race through Christ Jesus our Lord, “For there is one God, one mediator, etc.” (1 Tim. 2). I will make little dispute if anyone should reject this opinion and think that they who by nature do what belongs to the law must not be reckoned among the number of those whom the grace of Christ justifies, but rather [think that they] should be reckoned among those among whom are even the impious, who do not worship the true God truthfully and justly; nevertheless we read of or know of or hear of certain deeds that, according to the rule of justice, we not only cannot condemn, but we even deservedly and rightly praise them. Although if one were to dispute the purpose with which [these deeds] were done, one could hardly find those who merited the praise and defense due to justice.[3] Nevertheless because the image of God has not been so erased in the human soul by the fall of the earthly affections that no last traces, as it were, remained in it, one therefore could rightly say that even in the impious behavior of one’s life one is doing or appreciating (*sapere*) some things that are of the law. That which was imprinted when we were created through the image of God was not blotted out in every way. For just as the same image of God is renewed in the minds of believers through the new covenant—that image which impiety had not completely destroyed, for reason remained, without which

the soul could not be called rational—so also there the law of God, which was not in every way blotted out through injustice, is certainly written when the mind has been renewed through grace.

Thus far have we reviewed Augustine's words, which, although they have been set forth rather confusedly and very obscurely, nevertheless they seem to say that something of the image imprinted by God on the soul does remain, by whatever name the gentiles give it, whether reason or nature. Paul certainly calls "law" that which has been imprinted on nature by God. But that which this spark, given and imprinted by God (that is, the reason of uncorrupted nature), does not dictate, will necessarily be vicious and depraved, as Augustine has said, because vices are contrary to nature. Cicero also says the same thing, though with different words: "The things that are good by nature are corrupted by the snares of pleasure, which is the mother of all vices."

If anyone should focus on this goal, if anyone listens to and follows this voice of nature, he will be illuminated with greater grace through Christ. He who neglects this voice and turns a deaf ear to it because he follows the command of his affections cannot even be called a just or good man in the eyes of men; for as each [such] man (*quisque*) refers whatever he does to his own advantage, he is thus least of all a good man, seeing as one who measured virtue by its reward would think that there is no virtue except malice.^[4]

But if penalties (*poena*) and not nature had the task of protecting men from injury, what concern would discourage the impious at all if fear of punishment were taken away?—although no impious person has ever been so audacious, because either he denies that what he did was wrong, or he invents some explanation for his deserved anguish and looks for a defense against nature by means of some right. Thus wicked people suffer punishment not so much by means of the courts (which at one time existed nowhere; today in many places there are none), as though courts were a fiction (still they are indeed very often fraudulent), as by the fact that the furies agitate and persecute them, not with pestering stings (as in myths), but with the anguish of conscience, and the torment of [having committed] a crime. But if the penalty, if the fear of punishment, and not the baseness itself [is what] deters one from a life of crime and wrongdoing, no one is unjust—we should instead call the wicked "incautious." And then we who are moved to be good men not by what is noble in itself but rather by some utility and profit (*utilitate aliqua et fructu*), are "shrewd," not good.

For what will the man who fears nothing but a witness or a judge do in the shadows? What will a man in a deserted place do if he happens to find a weak and solitary man whom he could rob of a great deal of gold? Our man who is just and good by nature (*Noster hic natura vir iustus ac bonus*) will certainly talk with him, help him, and lead him along the road. But the man who does nothing for the sake of someone else and measures all things by what is to his advantage, I think you see what he is going to do. If, however, he denies that he would take that man's life and take away his gold, he will never deny it because nature judges that action to be base, but because he is afraid that the crime might become known and that he might be ruined.

But where is this drawn out philosophizing going, someone might say? The point is so that we can see what Paul called the law written on our hearts by God (for no one but God alone can write onto the heart), and so that we can understand that the truth has been written down even through the gentiles. Indeed, we, who consider not who says something but what it is that they say, gladly accept truth even if it was spoken by gentiles. For we know that every truth is from God, whoever turns out to have been the means of revealing it. From filth we collect gold and gems to decorate the house of our God.

But we are now approaching the main point: we will show in what way Christ by his teaching and spirit reformed this nature or image that was engraved on the mind and was debased. For in Christ all things are most brilliantly and perfectly set forth. And although by virtue of the length of time [that they had] the gentiles said and wrote some good things (for the mystery of that light was covered and buried deep down), nevertheless Christ the light of the whole world establishes all things most perfectly.

And so, when he had come to explaining the law, which had been debased and almost suppressed by the tradition-mongering (*deuterotas*) Pharisees, with a brief summary at the end of his speech he pulls together all laws into their summit and principle, and reduces them to their primeval origin. For all laws can in no way be good unless they are founded on the law of nature. Therefore Christ says, “Whatever you wish that men do to you, do the same also to them. This is the law and the prophets.” Then he explains this more clearly in chapter 22 when he says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, etc., and your neighbor as [you love] yourself. On these two precepts the whole law and the prophets depend.”

But this must be observed: that this law of nature must be measured not by the affections of the flesh or by any man, but by God. For after the flesh was corrupted in Adam, it neither commands nor does anything good. And because Adam soon began to seek the honor belonging to divinity, all those born of Adam desire to be set over others. From this comes the fact that one man wants to be lord over others, and that another wishes to obey and be subordinate to no one. Both of them do not hear the law of uncorrupted nature (for it does cry out to each of them). But just as the law of nature restrains tyrants from oppressing others with violence, despising others, and becoming sole ruler, so in turn does it teach corrupted flesh that it is necessary that some one person be set over others and wield the reins of the state: to punish the guilty, guard the innocent, and be the vindicator of justice and the laws. The law of nature then is nothing else than true religion, that is, the knowledge of how to worship and fear the Supreme Divinity. No one but God alone can teach this knowledge and worship. And this law of nature that has been engraved by God on the human heart (*pectori*), that has been debased by vice, is renewed through the grace of Christ. For as this light is first illuminated for man through the Spirit of God, so it is later remade and confirmed through the Spirit of Christ.

[1] Zwingli’s Latin edition of St. Augustine (or at least the passage as written in the Schuler and Schulthess edition of this text) differs from later editions (especially that of Migne) that have become standard today. Very important differences are indicated in footnotes here.

[2] This sentence is translated not from Zwingli’s text but rather from the Migne edition, which reads, *Qua gratia in interiore homine renovato iustitia scribitur*. Zwingli’s text instead reads, *Quae gratia in interiore homine renovato iustitia scribitur* which admits of more than one reading, neither of which is satisfying. These readings are “This grace is written in the renewed inner man by means of justice” or “This grace in the renewed inner man is written as ‘justice.’”

[3] At the text here rendered “I will make little dispute . . .” down to “deservedly and rightly praise them,” the Migne text of *De Spiritu et Littera* instead suggests the following (more coherent though more drawn-out) reading: “But if these, who by nature do what is of the law, must not yet be reckoned among the number of those whom Christ justifies, but rather among those whose number indeed includes the impious and those who do not worship the true God truthfully and rightly, we nevertheless do read or know or hear of certain deeds which, according to the rule of justice, not only can we not condemn but we even deservedly and rightly praise them; although if there were a question of the purpose with which they are done we could scarcely find deeds that deserved the praise and defense owed to justice.”

[4] The text here rendered “for as each [such] man” up to “no virtue except malice” translates the following sentence: *Ut enim quisque maxime ad suum commodum refert quaecumque agit, ita minime est vir bonus, ut qui virtutem praemio metiatur, nullam virtutem nisi malitiam putet*. The insertion of “[such]” after “each” in the translation is not strictly necessary from the meaning of *quisque* (which simply means “each”), but without it Zwingli would seem to suggest that every man makes all his decisions based on what is to his advantage. Such an opinion would contradict the position that Zwingli

defends in the remainder of the text.

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