

A Disputation on the Light of Nature

1628

Henry Alting¹

1. The light of nature is the remaining knowledge in the mind of man after the Fall.
2. Its object is things natural, civil and divine.
3. Natural things respect nature, its power and its order.²
4. Civil things pertain to the reason³ of civil life, and are comprehended by ethics, politics and economics.⁴
5. Divine things are that which is known of God, namely: that God is, and that He is to be worshipped by us, Rom. 1:19-21.
6. This is surely the natural knowledge of God, which spontaneously springs forth in human adults furnished with a sound mind, and is confirmed in them by the contemplation of the works of God;

¹ [Alting](#) (1583-1644) was a German, reformed, professor of theology at Heidelberg (1613-1622) and a professor of historical theology at Groningen, Netherlands (1627-1644). He, with Abraham Scultetus, represented the University of Heidelberg at the Synod of Dort in 1618. This work was published as *Disputatio Prima de Lumine Naturae...* (Johann Sas, 1628) and appears to be the theses that were proposed to be disputed for the affirmative in a forthcoming disputation in the academy at Groningen. Alting was to preside while Fredericus Mylander, likely a student, would be the respondent. While the respondent would do most of the initial disputing, the president would ultimately be responsible for the final content of the disputation. This disputation is of special interest in understanding the background to Westminster's affirmations regarding the light of nature: WCF 1.1; 1.6; 10.4; 20.4; 21.1; WLC 2, 60, 121, 151. This work was translated by Travis Fentiman and kindly checked by Charles Johnson. It is placed in the public domain (2022), to be used only for godly purposes.

² This category would seem to encompass what we understand as science, which was often comprehended under natural philosophy in Alting's day.

³ *ratio*, principle or foundation

⁴ While "economics" commonly referred broadly to many diverse things involving the administration of things, it was also often used to refer to domestic or family matters. If so here, the sense may be that civil things encompass personal ethics, civil politics and family matters.

7. So that those who deny them are more stupid than the very gentiles, dumber than the very barbarians.
8. On the other hand, who God is and what is his right and saving worship, not even the most wise have seen this by the light of reason.
9. Acts 17, Those ignorant people of Athens are said to worship an unknown God, in that general sense in which the Samaritans worshipped that which they know not, Jn. 4:22.
10. In Rom. 2:14 the apostle says, the gentiles by nature do those things which are of the law, insofar as they bring forth certain honest works enjoined by the law, even by the instinct of nature.
11. No one of the heathens therefore truly acknowledged God or rightly worshipped Him.
12. None of them, indeed, has reached eternal salvation by the benefit of nature.
13. False is that saying that the gentiles through nature, the Jews through the Law, and Christians through the Gospel are saved.
14. It is also false that the principles of religion are to be sought in nature and drawn from it.
15. Likewise it is false that the light of nature, or of natural reason, in any way conflicts with the light of grace in the Word.⁵
16. Lastly, it is false that the light of grace is poured out upon the one who rightly uses the light of nature.

⁵ *Falsum etiam: quod Lumen naturae, sive rationis naturalis, nullo modo pugnet cum Lumine gratiae in verbo.* This double negative has been interpreted as implying a negative, but it could also possibly signify an affirmative: "Likewise it is false that the light of nature, or of natural reason, in no way conflicts with the light of grace in the Word." If this was intended, the sense may refer to teachings such as in Lk. 14:26-27; Mt. 4:19-20; 16:25-25 & 19:29-30. It is possible that certain opponents of Alting either ignored or downplayed these Scriptural teachings in their synthesis of nature and grace. The light of nature and grace, though, do not ultimately conflict even in these passages insofar as even by the light of nature the call and command of God take priority over our natural relations.

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