Herbert McCabe's Genius: Language, Natural Law and Unity

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Abstract

The work of Herbert McCabe offers a model for thinking about the world and human life in it that has yet to be fully appreciated. In this essay, I argue that McCabe's linguistic model provides invaluable insight into human communication and the moral life, showing the natural law to be more like scaffolding than a list of stipulations.

Keywords

I. Herbert McCabe's Linguistic Model Reveals the Depth of Human Communication, Especially in Christ

The work of Herbert McCabe offers a model for thinking about the world and human life in it that has yet to be fully appreciated. In this essay, I argue that McCabe's linguistic model provides invaluable insight into human communication and the moral life, showing the natural law to be more like scaffolding than a list of stipulations.

A. McCabe's Linguistic Account of Ethics Focuses on Communication, the Active Sharing of a Common Life[1]

Rather than discussing the moral life strictly in terms of laws or some notion of love, McCabe argues that it is language that endows human life with special significance. Humans make use of language within specific "worlds," or non-neutral environments, in order to move beyond mere sensuous response. Whereas a non-linguistic animal's

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[1] Herbert McCabe, *Law, Love and Language* (New York: Continuum, 2003), 73. Henceforth this book will be referred to as L, L, L.

world takes shape solely through sensous activity (e.g. a puppy learns to stay within the confines of an electric fence only after repeatedly testing the boundaries and receiving small shocks), as a linguistic animal a human is often able to craft responses to its environment that are not reflexively sensuous. Two non-linguistic animals can communicate with each other to a limited extent (e.g. two dogs may live within the same electric fence but recognize certain spots as territory of the other because of some well-placed urine), but in the linguistic animal "communication reaches a new intensity."[2] The linguistic animal is able to create its own media of communication, moving beyond what is instilled in it at birth through genetics.[3]

McCabe identifies three keys to the process of creating a linguistic medium of communication: nature, history, and biography.[4] By nature, McCabe simply means the human body. The ability to learn a language is rooted in the structure of the human body, which allows the individual to recognize itself in others and attune itself to their ways.[5] History and biography are then what decisively set apart the linguistic being. History refers to the embeddedness of a language in a community that extends through time. This allows for the emergence of meanings within these communities (e.g. swinging a stick at a round object becomes known as batting a baseball, a practice which is passed down through generations). Finally, biography refers to the overlapping or intersecting of various historical communities that leads to the creation of new meanings. Individuals who find themselves at these points of intersection occasionally find ways to bring elements of the colliding languages together to produce new forms of communication to which the larger community then responds.[6] These new forms are capable of enabling humans to relate to each other in fresh ways. For McCabe, ethics is ultimately concerned with these ways in which humans relate. Ethics is about finding "less and less trivial modes of human relatedness" in a way that points to an "ultimate medium of human communication which is beyond humanity."[7] As the remainder of this section unfolds, I will explain how these new human forms of communication ultimately fall short and how Jesus can then be understood as a revolutionary new form of communication.

[2] *Ibid.*, 74.
[3] *Ibid.*, 76–7.
[4] *Ibid.*, 80.
[5] *Ibid.*, 81.
[6] *Ibid.*, 89–90.
[7] *Ibid.*, 99.

B. Human Attempts to Fix Fissures in Communication
Before/Without Jesus are Destined to Fail

Because linguistic beings constantly find themselves at the inter-
sections of linguistic communities, it is not surprising that many
attempts have been made to find ways of communicating that bring
those communities together. Some have tried to do so by looking
at the converging communities and searching for common ground,
for something like a "least common denominator." Others have tried
to pick one form of society (shockingly, almost always their own)
to espouse, sometimes even forcibly, as the natural mode of being.
However, none of these human attempts have resulted in a form of
communication that approaches the least trivial mode of relatedness
to which McCabe refers. In this section, I will argue that these fail-
ures highlight the need for an entirely new form of communication
that is capable of bringing humans together in a way that transcends
their limited modes of relating to one another.

I begin with a narrative from the Hebrew Scriptures that describes
a human community that was perhaps close to sharing one common
world. Here, everyone speaks the same language: "Now the whole
earth had one language and the same words" (Gen 11.1).[8] However,
fissures have already appeared within the community as it has ex-
panded territorially. Some of those who have settled in the land of
Shinar sense a growing disunity and come up with a plan to solid-
ify their community. They set about attempting to build a great city
with a tower that reaches the heavens, believing that their efforts
will unite humanity under their soon-to-be famous name (Gen 11.4).
However, their grand plan is foiled when YHWH comes to scatter
them throughout the world, scrambling their language in the pro-
cess in order to further prevent them from collaborating on such acts
(Gen 11.7–9). McCabe describes this story as indicative of the effort
"to create a human identity" that "collapses in failure of communica-
tion."[9] Although the actions of these Shinarites might seem somewhat
well-intentioned, there is a sense that something about humans has
made attempts at defining a single, stable human community futile.

This story shows the dangerous tendency of linguistic beings to
strive for something other than a form of communication that unifies
all. Even though the world still shared one basic language, the indi-
vidual communities were developing their own customs and symbols
as they spread slowly into the world, giving them unique histo-
ries. The Shinarites express concerns about communication, but their
answer is to elevate their own city as the great hope of the people.

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[8] All Scriptural references will be from the NRSV.
[9] See McCabe, L, L, L, 111.

McCabe identifies this inclination to settle for a partial local identity as a form of idolatry.[10] Humans find it much easier to rest content in their local customs and "gods" than to give them up in search of a form of communication that is more difficult and disruptive.[11]

Failed attempts at uniting humankind are not confined solely to the Hebrew Scriptures. McCabe's model shows that a 21st century world with boundless technology for communication that still defines man or woman in such a way that slavery, racism, and extreme poverty exist cannot be understood to be fostering a less trivial form of communication than the world of the ancient Israelites.[12] Furthermore, the cost of failure is now much higher because humankind now possesses the ability to completely destroy itself with nuclear warfare. McCabe compares the current situation to a gambler that continues to double her stake each time she loses: "As our attempts at civilization get more sophisticated and more extensive the cost of failure rises."[13]

Within McCabe's framework, all of these failures in communication are understood in a new way through the lens of Jesus' crucifixion. They become clear examples of patterns of sin, of the self-destructive tendencies of human beings. This is evident in the 2007 papal encyclical *Spe salvi*, which recalls the tower of Babel: "Sin is understood by the Fathers as the destruction of the unity of the human race, as fragmentation and division. Babel, the place where languages were confused, the place of separation, is seen to be an expression of what sin fundamentally is."[14] On this view, sin is the antithesis of perfect communication. Jesus' crucifixion then represents the culmination of these selfish rejections of the call to transcendence of limited communication. Jesus was crucified by a world that was settling for an imperfect society on two fronts, via the Roman colonial empire and the Jewish religious hierarchy.[15] As a result, the crucifixion of Jesus was probably inevitable, since humans had grown so accustomed to rejecting forms of sharing worlds that require vulnerability in love for those beyond local communities.[16] In order for humankind to overcome failures in communication in a crucifying world such as this, something revolutionary is needed.

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[10] *L, L, L*, 114.

[11] For example, the initial call of YHWH to those enslaved in Egypt is not met without resistance, since even life in subjugation has comforting patterns and securities that can keep hold of people.

[12] See *GM*, 121.

[13] *L,L,L*, 112.

[14] *Spe salvi*, 14.

[15] Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London: Geoffrey Champan, 1987), 123. Henceforth referred to as *GM*.

[16] See *L,L,L,* 131–3.

C. As the Word of God, Jesus is the New Form of Communication, a New Language, That Shows Humans the Path to Less Trivial Relatedness and Aids them in Navigating That Path[17]

McCabe's linguistic model helps us to understand how as the Word of God, Jesus offers an alternative to the seemingly perpetual pattern of breakdown in human communication. Without Jesus, humans find themselves at the intersections of various limited human communities that vie for their attention from all directions. The radically distinct ways in which these different communities function often eliminate any hope of seamlessly bringing them together (e.g. an associate trying to make it at a large corporate law firm would probably not try to introduce his brother, who was just released from prison and is still struggling with drug issues, to his bosses). However, the Christian narrative challenges these breakdowns in communication, as Jesus offers himself as the new form of communication in which all these disparate communities can participate.[18] McCabe explains that Jesus is "the body in which we shall all be interrelated members... he is the language in which we shall express ourselves to each other in accordance with the promise and summons of the Father. Now this language, this medium of expression, this body which belongs to the future is made really present for us in the church."[19]

The story of Pentecost, as a foil to the failure of Babel, shows how the church is able to move humanity towards this less trivial form of communication in Jesus. As the apostles speak the Word, everyone present is able to hear it despite their seemingly irreconcilable diversity of language. It is significant that rather than obliterating the differences between these people to bring them together, Jesus works through their own biographies, their own languages, to bring them to the new language in Him, via the church. In this new form of communication, the various divisions are no longer divisive: "There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). While McCabe's poet finds a way to bring a new insight from some of her own overlapping communities to the larger community, providing the chance at a new way of communicating,[20] for McCabe Jesus offers every human community the chance to be incorporated into Himself. Whenever humans respond to Jesus' offer, they allow themselves to be taken up into a new world of significance, in which

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[17] *Ibid.*, 129.
[18] See *L, L, L*, 129.
[19] *Ibid.,* 141.
[20] *Ibid.,* 89–90.

trivial, local forms of communication are no longer the only way of sharing lives.

For McCabe, the sacramental life of the church emerges as the way the new form of communication is prefigured in the temporal world, revealing to humans truths about the depths of existence.[21] These insights do not magically turn people into perfect moral beings, but provide glimpses of the less trivial form of communication that humans find in Christ.[22] For example, baptism is the beginning of one's participation in the new world of the Spirit, which was brought about through Christ's resurrection. Its first effect is faith, which enables one to believe in Christ and the destiny of humankind in Christ.[23] Baptism thus marks the beginning of participation in the new mode of communication of Christ. Baptism is a moment when limited forms of communication are clearly transcended, as the one baptized becomes uniquely joined to those in the Christian community throughout both space and time.

McCabe certainly highlights baptism's role in bringing people into the new creation, but it is actually the Eucharist that takes center stage in his account of the sacramental life of the church. He points out that food provides one of the most basic ways in which humans come together to share a world, from the "milk I receive from my mother's breast" to the "martini I receive from my host."[24] Speaking about the doctrine of transubstantiation, McCabe argues that as the mode of perfect communication Jesus has a better right to be food than bread (or breast milk or a martini) does, that Jesus is food in an "intensified and unimaginable sense."[25] Thus, whenever the church celebrates the Eucharist, it recognizes that the language of the present (words like bread, food, drink, etc.) is no longer enough.[26] The divine takes over and becomes present as the Body of Christ, "as our primary medium of communication."[27] The change from bread to body and wine to blood cannot be understood as simple shifts in the present language; rather, it highlights the need for the inbreaking of the new language. The Eucharist, as the center of the sacramental life of the church, is the "intersection of the future and present" that brings humans closest to their destiny while still on this side of death.[28]

Although the sacraments are of central importance, they do not tell the whole story. For one thing, when imperfect forms of com-

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[21] *Ibid.,* 145.
[22] *Ibid.,* 146.
[23] Herbert McCabe, *The New Creation* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 41–3.
[24] *GM*, 127.
[25] *Ibid.,* 126–8.
[26] *Ibid.,* 127.
[27] *Ibid.,* 152.
[28] *Ibid.,* 127.

munication are finally left behind and humanity fully enters into the new mode of communication (i.e. the beatific vision), there will no longer be a need for sacraments. But of more immediate concern is the process by which humans make choices in their lives when they are not directly receiving the Eucharist, confessing their sins, etc. The second portion of this paper will turn to this issue, explaining how the natural law enables humans to better live into the new form of communication of Jesus.

II. Within McCabe's Type of Model, the Natural Law Functions Not as a Set of Permanent Stipulations But as Scaffolding for Building a Flourishing, Unified Human Community

Familiarity with natural law thought breeds a certain frustration, especially for those who appreciate clear definitions and obvious practical application. From the desperate appeals of Antigone to Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone* to the meticulously crafted basic goods of the "New Natural Law" of Germain Grisez, John Finnis, et al., the term "natural law" has surfaced again and again throughout history in vastly different formulations. Voices on both sides of fierce debates appeal to various forms of natural law to make their claims.[29] Today, some see the "natural law" as the foundation upon which to ground a universal morality that could foster greater unity in a pluralistic world[30] while others dismiss its relevance entirely.[31]

This paper will not try to settle any of these major issues surrounding the natural law. The extreme variations concerning the natural law even within specific schools of Christian theology point to the difficulty of attempting such a task.[32] My goal with the remainder of this paper is much more modest. I hope to show that within a linguistic model like McCabe's, the natural law is best understood not as a series of stipulations, but as the "scaffolding of the good life,"[33]

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[29] Homosexuality is one such debate that typifies these appeals to natural law. Claiming Thomas Aquinas as their guide, both Jean Porter (*Nature as Reason*) and Matthew Levering (*Biblical Natural Law*) have written books devoted to natural law thought that lend themselves to potentially conflicting conclusions about homosexuality.

[30] See the recent document from the International Theological Commission, "The Search for Universal Ethics: A New Look at Natural Law." This approach is potentially problematic, as evidenced by sweeping statements such as "in the African traditions" (15), but these issues are beyond the scope of this paper.

[31] See Matthew Levering's *Biblical Natural Law*, chapter 1, for a discussion of leading Biblical scholars who see no place for natural law. Even those who write specifically about the natural law, such as Thomas Aquinas or Russell Hittinger, do seem to question the usefulness of natural law in adjudicating particular moral dilemmas.

[32] For example, Levering and Porter both consider themselves Thomists.

[33] I borrow this term from Terry Eagleton's *After Theory*, although I will develop it in a slightly different direction. For Eagleton's brief description of the term, see pp. 144–5.

enabling humans to move towards the unity that God desires for humankind.

A. Revealed Law is not Utterly Distinct from or Inimical to the Natural Law; Rather, Revealed Law Represents Specific Instances Where God Radically Expedites the Process of Natural Law

As the first portion of this paper argued, the major aim of the new mode of communication is an increasingly unified human community. A human community concerned only with what not to do will surely falter in such a quest. Prohibitions may prevent certain atrocities, but carry very little impetus for character growth. For example, it is difficult to imagine a prohibition that inclines one to self-sacrifice. It seems then that a community based solely on prohibitions could not be a robust, flourishing, unified community. The major goal of this section is thus to show how the natural law is something other than a series of stipulations. However, I will begin by explaining how the natural law does not replace or ignore some basic injunctions.

Certain human actions clearly inhibit the quest for human unity, regardless of the contingencies of the situation. They attack the roots of any community based on charity.[34] Although humans could potentially figure out what these acts are, human limits and the pervasiveness of sin make this an exceedingly difficult proposition. Mercifully, God revealed the Ten Commandments to the ancient Israelites, which include a list of human actions that cannot possibly contribute to the unity of God's people. These are not meant to serve as foundational principles upon which to build a complex list of derived rules. Rather, they set up the boundaries or outer limits of the charitable community. As McCabe points out, humans do not have much trouble recognizing that the acts prohibited in the Ten Commandments are not going to bring unity.[35] However, these prohibitions alone do not bring about a flourishing, unified community. If humans are to achieve this sort of community, how then do they go about doing so?

Before I turn to that question, I need to discuss a second instance of revealed law. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus speaks around the Ten Commandments in a new way. In a series of triads, Jesus gives practical advice to his audience that exposes cycles that eventually result in transgression of the prohibited acts of the Decalogue. These

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[34] Herbert McCabe, "Manuals and Rule Books," in *Considering Veritatis Splendor*, edited by John Wilkins (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 65. McCabe offers as an example the action of killing the innocent.

[35] *Ibid.,* 67.

triads serve as heuristics, or rules of thumb, to guide those within the community as they navigate the challenge of living well with the goal of perfect human communication.[36] For example, Matthew 5:21–26 addresses the slippery slope that results from engaging in the name-calling that was characteristic of the one-upmanship of the society. If one is not careful, such behavior can lead to conflicts that have to be resolved in court. If one's one-upmanship continues to go unchecked, it could eventually lead to even more serious conflict, which could potentially result in murder (the link to the Decalogue). So, Jesus offers some general advice that can help those who find themselves falling into this dangerous cycle. His words come in the form of prescriptive guidelines rather than proscriptions as he challenges people to reconcile with their adversaries before things go too far.[37] Rather than simply reiterating an ancient prohibition against murder, Jesus has provided the community with tips for living in ways that enable them to avoid running up against the very need for the prohibition! Such tips function as aids for people as they navigate the challenges of living in community with unity as its goal.

B. The Natural Law Fits into the Model as the Mode of Knowledge That Enables Humans to Participate in God's Providential Wisdom, Learning How to Flourish as a Community Working Towards Unity in Jesus

If the revealed law provides limits and basic heuristics, how do actual people living in communities in time negotiate these in terms of the demands of their lives? For a model like McCabe's, this is where the natural law makes its entrance as "simply" the capacity for practical reasoning.[38] When read apart from the rest of McCabe's model, the simplicity of this definition is worrisome.[39] The remainder of this section will explain how McCabe is able to successfully hold his position by unpacking what he means by this definition.

Central to understanding natural law in a model like McCabe's is the notion that human life is not something that humans create entirely themselves. Rather, human life is initially God's gift, a gift

[36] See Glen Stassen. "The Fourteen Triads of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21–7:12)." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122, no. 2 (2003): 267–308. See also Brad Kallenberg's helpful summary of Stassen's argument.

[37] This is Brad Kallenberg's summary of Stassen's take on this passage, which Stassen formulates by paying attention to the grammatical structure of the triad.

[38] McCabe, "Manuals and Rule Books," 65.

[39] In his book *The First Grace*, Hittinger warns that equating the natural law with merely the "human power to make practical judgments" runs the risk of losing its "specifically legal character" (46). The encyclical *Veritatis splendor* is similarly concerned with how the natural law is defined.

that includes general instructions for proper use.[40] As noted above, certain actions can never contribute to the unity of humankind. However, these are not readily accessible, crystal-clear instructions; God does not spell out in detail the proper response to every particular situation one might encounter. Instead, human life is about the messy process of discovering how life is best lived.[41] God grants humans freedom in this process, but he does so not so that humans can make random scatterings of pointless "free" decisions, but so they can freely choose to participate in God's divine wisdom, which guides them towards unity. This very participation takes place through practical reasoning, which McCabe calls "a sharing in the exercise of *providentia* on God's part,"[42] and it is this participation that is the natural law.

According to Aquinas, the first principle of this practical reasoning can be summed up in the maxim, "Seek good and avoid evil."[43] Although this is an extremely general statement, the limits of the Commandments and the heuristics of the Sermon on the Mount provide the beginning of a general framework for working out the application of it to concrete situations. When humans reason practically about these situations within this framework, they are in a position to better make decisions that contribute to human unity.

The modern mindset might tempt one to think about the process of practical reasoning within the individual. However, in a model like McCabe's, practical reasoning is more complex because it always takes place in a shared world in time. In other words, practical reasoning is not a process carried out in isolation, nor does it function in the exact same way regardless of context or time period. Decisions of practical reasoning take into account a variety of factors or layers, including relevant past practical judgments and frameworks such as the limits of the 10 Commandments. An individual who joins a new community will not immediately be able to make the same practical judgments as seasoned veterans because the new individual is not yet steeped in that community's tradition, not yet aware of the existing frameworks.

Charles Taylor's account of rule following helps elucidate this layered communal aspect of practical reasoning. Taylor begins by stating that it is second-nature to most to follow the direction the tip of an arrow is pointing. However, a stranger that has never seen an arrow before might respond differently, especially if the stranger's

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[40] Some authors use this metaphor to build an understanding of natural law as stipulations; I hope to redirect it.

[41] See McCabe, "Manuals and Rule Books," 63–4.

[42] *Ibid.,* 66.

[43] See McCabe, "Manuals and Rule Books," 65, for McCabe's take on Aquinas in the *Summa*, q. 94 a. 2.

own culture features some sort of gun that shoots out a missile that fans out like the feathers of an arrow.[44] This simple example shows that one's practical reasoning depends in some sense on prior premises that are no longer at the level of consciousness. This is not to say that when pressed people could not explain why they follow the arrow's point, but it acknowledges that at a certain point a practice can become a given in a community, allowing people to focus their attention elsewhere. Taylor refers to such practices as part of the embodied "background understanding" of a community, which is normally unarticulated but also provides the grounds for fresh articulation of rules.[45] Because this understanding is embodied, rules that spring from it cannot be plucked from that community and seamlessly integrated into another. Without the proper background understanding, a rule is essentially unintelligible and useless.

This treatment of Taylor's rich account is admittedly selective, but it is adequate for the task at hand, which is to explain how the natural law, or practical reasoning, enables humans to flourish as they work towards unity in Christ. As humans try to live into the new form of communication, they make countless practical decisions. Certain situations occur quite often, and as members of the community continue to respond to these situations in the same way, these practical responses make their way into the general background understanding of the community. Eventually, these practices become so ingrained in the community that members no longer worry about why they engage in them. They become part of the heuristic framework that frees people to focus on other, perhaps more complex, situations awaiting practical engagement. Because of this process, one can differentiate between the novice and the expert practitioner (or in Christian language, the saint).

In order to further clarify this understanding of natural law as practical reasoning, I will briefly discuss a concrete example from the history of the church community.[46] Within the first few decades following Jesus' crucifixion, the growing community found itself embroiled in a challenging controversy. Because the community now included many who were not born Jews, the question of the necessity of circumcision arose. Some members of the community saw it as necessary for membership in the new creation, whereas others argued that circumcision was one in a number of practices that actually inhibited the ability of Jesus' followers to share a common world.

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[44] Charles Taylor, "To Follow a Rule . . ." in *Bourdieu: A Critical Reader*, edited by Richard Shusterman (Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 29.

[45] *Ibid.*, 37.

[46] I have chosen to discuss this in a general manner in order to avoid getting caught up in the various arguments about the specifics of the Council of Jerusalem, which are definitely beyond the scope of this paper.

Although the process of adjudicating these conflicting positions was a messy one, a compromise was eventually reached. Uncircumcised converts were not required to undergo the process, although they were held to a series of other requirements of the community.[47] The community had made use of practical reasoning to deal with a repeating problem and by settling the matter was able to focus its attention elsewhere. The decision about circumcision became part of the community's framework and eventually faded from consciousness. Practical reasoning thus enabled the community to overcome a divisive issue, moving it a bit closer to the unity that Christ desires.

In an unpublished introduction to McCabe's *Law, Love, and Language*, Stanley Hauerwas writes that "I like very much Herbert's account of the 'county council' understanding of natural law."[48] The preceding discussion of the natural law as practical reasoning helps make sense of what Hauerwas and McCabe mean when they refer to this "county council." McCabe links the natural law to the 'county council' when he states: "I think we could speak of natural law if I made rules for myself and then saw that these are the rules which would have been made for everybody by a 'county council' if we happened to hear its voice."[49] McCabe wants to drive home the point that humans belong to a linguistic community whether they like it or not, and that there are certain ways of living in that community that are better than others. Humans are capable (despite the limitations of sin) of figuring out these preferred ways through practical reasoning whether a county council proclaims them or not.[50] As members specifically of the new community in Christ, Christians have the benefit of several aids in this process of practical reasoning (i.e. limits of the 10 Commandments, tips from the Sermon on the Mount). As a result, Christians are uniquely positioned to more fully flourish as linguistic beings sharing a common world through participation in Christ.

III. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have argued that humankind cannot achieve perfect communication on its own, that it needs the new mode of

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[47] These included prohibitions against fornication, idolatry, and eating bloody meat (See Acts 15 and Galatians 2 for detailed accounts of this controversy).

[48] Stanley Hauerwas, "An Unpublished Foreword," *New Blackfriars* 86, no. 103 (May 2005), 294.

[49] *L,L,L*, 56.

[50] McCabe thinks that the "county council" does speak at least on one occasion . . . the 10 commandments!

communication in Christ. Christ summons humans to move out of their limited societies in order to be unified in Him as a new creation. Although this will not be fully realized in the present world, the church is the community where people can begin to participate in this process. The natural law has and continues to enable Christians to navigate the difficulties that come with living into this new mode of communication. As new situations arise, Christians figure out how to best handle them within the framework of their community, drawing on heuristics and keeping limits in mind. Through this process of reasoning and faith, Christians are able to participate in God's providence, discovering the ways God intended God's people to flourish. Once such discoveries are made, they become part of the framework or foundation of the community and become second nature or habitual. Then, the community can move onward to negotiate new and greater challenges. Thus, the natural law can be thought of as the scaffolding of a building, enabling those constructing the building to work on each successive level. Once a level is complete, the scaffolding can be moved up to the next. This understanding of natural law is superior to that which sees it as a series of stipulations. Natural law as scaffolding can better account for the complexity of the moral life and allows the human community to escape from legalism, leaving behind certain rules as it grows in its knowledge of how God intends humans to flourish together.

Before I conclude, I must admit a significant concern. If practical reasoning does in fact function in this manner, then a significant error at an early level could prove catastrophic. It seems to me that history affirms this concern. For example, the early Christians did not put up a great deal of resistance to the forms of slavery that existed in their communities. It comes as little surprise then that Christians in the colonial period had little trouble justifying the new forms of slavery that worked to their benefit and building up a vast system based on them. In a case such as this, the community must find a way to dig deep into the framework that it has built up if there is any hope of change. This is a painful process that can require deconstruction of that framework. Once again, this process is going to require scaffolding, since the community has to reason about how communication has broken down and how God wants it to react. But it is here that grace is most evident in history, for the breaking of habits and reconfiguration of frameworks is extremely difficult. Such grace is clear in the actions of people like Bartolome de Las Casas or Martin Luther King, people who find the strength to challenge the very frameworks that the community builds upon. In fact, this challenging of foundational habits is characteristic of the ultimate example of God's grace, Jesus Christ. It seems then that through some combination of grace and practical reasoning, humans do have reason to be hopeful for greater unity in this world.

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