

Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Christology, Session 7, Modern Christology, Part 2, Barth, Bultmann, and Pannenberg

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This is Dr. Robert Peterson in his teaching on Christology. This is session 7, Modern Christology, Part 2, Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Wolfhart Pannenberg.

We continue our study of modern Christology with the figure of Karl Barth.

His influence was felt throughout Western theology in the 20th century in a big way. For him, the whole subject of Christology was central to theology, and in conscious reaction to the liberal theology of the preceding century that he was taught, he affirmed the classical orthodox statements of the first five centuries on the person of Christ. Barth was taught under some of the leading liberals of his day.

He served as a pastor, and that theology just didn't work. So, in his own words, he discovered the strange new world of the Bible and began to preach that. My presentation of Barth will be largely positive, but I don't mean to, I don't claim to be a Barthian, and there are definitely problems.

For example, Emil Brunner, who was one of my doctoral figures, whom I know better than Barth, rejected the historical fall, and that just created a lot of problems, and yet they believed people were really sinners and needed to be forgiven, and that kind of a thing. However, Barth's use of scripture was also better than his doctrine of scripture. He did not confess anything like inerrancy.

And another big problem overall is the tendency of his theology toward universalism. He denied it, but many have concluded that that's where it goes anyway in spite of his denial. So, with those caveats, I agree.

He affirmed the classical orthodox statements of the first five centuries on the person of Christ. Throughout his long career, he adhered faithfully to classical Christology, and the shifts that took place were within that framework, especially since his study in 1931 of Anselm, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, is the English translation. Barth was bent upon a thoroughgoing Christological concentration of the whole range of systematic theology.

In the first volume of his famous *Church Dogmatics*, he wrote, quote, a church dogmatics must, of course, be Christologically determined as a whole, and in all its parts, as surely as the revealed Word of God, attested by Holy Scripture, and proclaimed by the Church, is its one and only criterion, and as surely as this revealed

Word is identical with Jesus Christ. If dogmatics cannot regard itself and cause itself to be regarded as fundamentally Christology, it has assuredly succumbed in some alien way and is already on the verge of losing its character as church dogmatics. According to Barth, Jesus Christ is the beginning of all God's ways and works.

Everything starts with God's election of the God-man Jesus Christ. For this reason, everything else must be seen in the light of Jesus Christ. I keep thinking of different aspects of his theology.

To my knowledge, and I have written a book on election and free will, he's the first person in the history of the church to understand election as he did, and in the end, I would regard it as a brilliant failure, for we're chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, Ephesians 1, for Barth means that Jesus himself is the elect and reprobate man for everyone. Again, that shows the tendency toward universalism, and he uniquely taught that. He influenced others who followed him in that, but that is not the teaching of Ephesians 1, is that God chose people with the prospect of joining them to Christ.

It does not talk about the election of Christ. As a matter of fact, Barth so made Christ the center of his thought, he has at times been accused of Christomonism, of emphasizing Christ in a way that compromises other aspects of his theology. It is true. As I said, I studied Brunner, and Brunner and Barth clashed over natural revelation and natural theology.

Brunner, unfortunately, used unclear terminology, but Barth jumped all over him. The interest in theology in Germany in the 40s and 50s was such that Barth could write a book entitled *None, No*, an angry reply to Emil Bruner, and people bought the book. That was incredible, but in retrospect and looking at the whole picture, Barth's denial of God's revelation in creation because of his insistence all revelation is in Christ is simply mistaken.

Psalms 19 and Romans 1 are key places that teach God has revealed himself in creation. Now again, I said Bruner used unfortunate language, and he talked about a natural theology that made Barth nervous. It's rather a natural or general revelation.

It is true that unsaved people have natural theologies, but they're all distorted by sin. Anyway, there is some truth to the Christomonism claim. Barth viewed Christ in the framework of classical orthodox theology.

Without any hesitation, he accepts the Christology of the ancient church. The central statement, which is a quote from the Christology of the ancient church, is that God becomes one with man, Jesus Christ, very God and very man, quoting from the Church Dogmatics again. When liberals accused Chalcedon of intellectualism, of emphasizing intellect to the denigration of biblical teaching, the council, he replied,

cannot be faulted with intellectualism for quote, in speaking of the two natures of the true God and the true man in the one person of Christ, it did not intend to solve the mystery of revelation.

That was the accusation. It's trying to speculate and solve that which is insolvable, but rather, it perceives and respects the mystery, close quote. That is exactly what we saw Chalcedon doing.

It didn't explain the mystery, and because it didn't fully explain it, you can't fully explain it. That brought criticisms, right? But here, he defends it, and that is really encouraging to see. Another place Barth said, one could also say the formula of Chalcedon is actually nothing less than an exegesis of John 1:14, the word became flesh.

Barth even defends such abstract terms as impersonal human nature and impersonal human nature of Christ. That is, he denied that there was a man, Jesus, apart from the incarnation, and he affirmed that from the very beginning of Jesus' humanity in Mary's womb, it was not impersonal but impersonal by union with the Logos in the Virgin's womb. So those are ways of protecting the deity and affirming the humanity of Christ.

There can be no doubt that Barth is fully in agreement with the Christology of the ancient church. As a matter of fact, due to him, a great revival of interest in and acceptance of ancient Christology in many circles occurred for a long time. Following Barth, many were willing to accept even the virgin birth again.

I say even because it was a subject of tremendous attacks in liberalism. Case in point, Emil Bruner denied the virgin birth of Christ. He regarded it as on the mythological fringe of the New Testament, and I quote Karl Barth, Emil Bruner's denial of the virgin birth is a bad business.

It casts his whole theology in a negative light. God has set signposts at the beginning and end of the life of our Lord. One is the virgin birth, and the other is the empty tomb.

We dare not move the signposts. In his part, Bruner felt squashed by Barth, who became, who was a giant, and there was some bad blood, so that at one point Bruner unwisely, with no doubt feeling pain because of Barth's writing books like *Nine, No*, and people knowing what that meant, called, referred to Barth as the theological dictator of Germany, a reference to Hitler and a terrible thing to say. And yet, is it somewhat deserved? Barth was a very strong customer, indeed.

Barth wholeheartedly accepted the classical doctrine of the Trinity. If Jesus really is the revelation of God, then there is a God who is revealed in him, and if the

revelation of God in and through Jesus Christ is to be really effective, then God himself must bring this revelation home to man the sinner. What he's doing is starting with Christ and affirming the doctrine of the Trinity.

Three times it is God himself who is the subject of his own word. He's the revealer. That's the Father. He's the revelation, that's the Son.

He's the revealedness, that's the Spirit. This can only mean that God is triune, that God himself, quoting Barth again, is unimpaired unity, yet he also exists in unimpaired difference as revealer, revelation, and revealedness. From this you pick up that Barth uses his own terminology, but he is affirming, and he's Christ-centered very much so.

He's affirming the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. As a matter of fact, he emphasized God is triune in his innermost being. It is not sufficient to accept an economic Trinity.

The economic Trinity is the Trinity revealed in the world, acting, and so forth. As in Ephesians 1, the Father chooses, the Son redeems, and the Spirit is the Father's seal on believers, protecting their salvation until the end. That's the economic Trinity, the Trinity in motion, the functional Trinity.

But Barth also accepted the ontological or imminent Trinity, that is, God is a triune God in himself. No wonder that for Barth, the divinity of Jesus Christ belonged to the very center of the Christian faith. In fact, in the earlier volumes of the Church Dogmatics, the centrality of Christ received so much emphasis that Barth's been accused of identifying Jesus with God to such an extent that his humanity recedes into the background, and there's hardly any place left for an over-against of Jesus and God.

In fairness, that's probably a true criticism, but in time, he balanced it out much more. The Christian Church has always avoided certain dangers by speaking emphatically of the Son in his human nature. The contrast is not between Father and Son as such.

It is not an inter-Trinitarian contrast or tension, but the Son in his human form subjects himself to the Father. The Gospels speak of the passion of Jesus as an act of God, which coincides with the free action and suffering of a man. But in such a way that this human action and suffering has to be represented and understood as the action and therefore the passion of God himself.

And that kind of statement, it looks like he stepped over the line and is almost teaching a patrapacianism, which he denies, and yet he is given extreme statements in such a way. In later years, we see a certain shift taking place in Barth's thinking. He

still maintains it is God who is the real subject in the revelation that took place in Jesus, but now the emphasis is much more on Jesus, who is a true representative of humankind and who, as such, acts as the human partner of God.

Jesus Christ is the true partner of God, and it is only through him that all other human beings can be partners of God. As Barth's influence was at its highest, its zenith, new trends emerged of a much more radical nature, which was to take Western theology along a road that led far from the orthodox position of the ancient church. It is to these that we now turn, and first and foremost is Rudolf Bultmann.

He was a genius and a pioneer of so many areas of study, of form criticism, of biblical theology, having written a book on that very topic. He wrote a tremendous commentary on the Gospel of John. On and on it goes hermeneutics, and yet there is certainly a Christology from below, but also a denial of many, many Christian doctrines.

I remember teaching 1 John 2 to a seminary class from the Greek text where it says, John tells his readers, you all know you don't need anyone to teach you, but God's anointing, a reference to the Holy Spirit, teaches you, and you know all things. The meaning is that they are not to be depressed because the false teachers who taught a faulty Christology and view of ethics left them and rejected them. They are to trust the Lord and the apostles and the spirit and go forward.

In this regard, I remember the students just being perplexed in class. How could Bultmann know so much and have such influence? Does he know in the sense of 1 John 2? Does he know the Father and the Son? And I'm not quick to pass judgments on others, all right? But how could he not know that if he knew so much? And the answer is, that is a knowledge that's spoken of in terms of faith. And even a little child who believes in Jesus knows the Father and the Son in a way that Bultmann, denying the incarnation, the deity of Christ, the miracles, heaven and hell, the resurrection of Jesus in the second coming, didn't know him.

What a sad state of affairs. But surely the most influential New Testament scholar of the 20th century. After World War II, a shift took place as Rudolf Bultmann's program of demythologizing and his existentialist interpretation of the biblical message became the new center of theological discussion.

For Bultmann, the cross of Christ was the center of all theology. But his approach to the cross and to the person of Jesus himself was decisively different from that of Barth in at least two ways. First of all, Bultmann approached the New Testament from a radical, critical point of view.

As one of the form-critical school, he believed that the New Testament writings do not describe the factual history but rather are the products of the theology of the

early Christian communities. In the process of oral transmission and regular preaching, all kinds of legendary elements were added to the original history of Jesus. So, the New Testament presents this three-decker universe with God and the angels here, humankind and the animals here, and the devils and hell here.

That was his view. We simply cannot accept that. And yet, the message of the New Testament is important.

So those legends and those incredible legendary elements, says the right words, need to be demythologized in order to make the message palatable and applicable and life-changing for modern men and women. Furthermore, as a representative of the religio-historical school, Bultmann also saw a close relationship between the New Testament message and the non-Christian religions of that period. I was somewhat shocked to read his theology of the New Testament, and he said many good things about John's theology, likewise of Paul, and then when he talked about their commonality, they agreed because they both got their ideas from the mystery religions and proto-Gnosticism.

I just was taken aback. Pre-Christian Gnosticism, that's what it was, which since has been refuted. It's a second-century phenomenon.

We have like some incipient trends in something like First John, but no, there's not a pre-Christian Gnosticism. So, his presuppositions were that the religions were equal in a sense and that they influenced each other in that kind of a thing. The notion of the normativity or revelation of the New Testament is simply absent.

Here, he found the background of the mythological interpretations of Jesus and his death and resurrection as given by the New Testament writers. The second important difference between Barth and Bultmann is that Bultmann tried to translate all the New Testament says about Jesus and his work into anthropological categories. Again and again, I kept finding in his writings another way, this is another way of expressing a believing self-understanding.

That's, it's about us. It's about us. As a matter of fact, the radical left philosophers and atheistic philosophers on the left said, Rudolph, you're doing well.

You're brilliant. You're doing well. You have absorbed Heidegger's existentialism and you're doing well.

If you demythologize one more thing, you're with us. But he refused to demythologize God totally. Oh, my word.

Here, we encounter the deep influence that the existentialist philosophy of the young Heidegger exerted upon Bultmann. For Bultmann, our theological knowledge

is, at the same time, knowledge about ourselves. As a matter of fact, one of his students did define God as a believing self-understanding.

The whole thing went interior. It's outrageous. We cannot speak of God without reference to our own concrete existential situation.

The same is true of our speaking of Jesus Christ. Of him, too, we cannot speak without speaking of ourselves at the same time. In this sense, one can say all theological and Christological discourse is in itself anthropological discourse.

This is true of Paul's theology, quoting Bultmann in his *Theology of the New Testament*. Every assertion about Christ is also an assertion about man and vice versa. And Paul's Christology is simultaneously soteriology.

Bultmann summarized his whole approach in his famous 1941 lecture, *New Testament and Mythology*, in which he launched his program of demythologizing. His starting point is the conviction that the New Testament is full of mythology. All the writers thought about the ancient world picture.

The universe is seen as a three-storied structure, as I've already said. Yes, yes, God himself intervenes continually in the affairs of this world and causes miraculous events to happen. He didn't believe that.

That's part of the mythology. All this, however, is utterly unacceptable to modern man. We can no longer accept the message of Jesus as presented in the New Testament with a literal incarnation, literal miracles, a literal atonement.

I didn't say limited. I said a literal atonement, a literal resurrection, and a literal ascension. All these matters belong to the mythological framework of the message.

The only way of discovering the message itself is to demythologize the New Testament thoroughly and radically. But are we not, in this way, falling back into the mistakes of the older liberals? Did they not do the same? Bultman realizes the problem here, and yet he insists there's a fundamental difference between his program of demythologizing and the program of the old liberals. His own method is quite different.

It is not the elimination of biblical legends but a reinterpretation. Our task is to find out what religious experiences the writers tried to express by means of all these myths. The answer to this question is not difficult.

These men had discovered that in the cross of the man, Jesus of Nazareth, they were delivered from the power of sin. Notice the man, Jesus of Nazareth. He's not the God-man.

In the same way, we must also demythologize the person of Jesus. It's obvious the New Testament gives a mythological interpretation of Jesus. It speaks of him as a pre-existent supernatural being who came down to earth and was born in a miraculous way.

In human form, he sacrificed himself for the sins of the world and died on the cross. After three days, he became alive again and returned to heaven in a miraculous way. In the future, he'll come back from heaven to earth.

All this is pure mythology. If you want to come to a true understanding of Jesus, we must again translate it into anthropological existential categories. What the New Testament writers really wanted to do was quote him again and again to express the meaning of the historical figure of Jesus and the events of his life.

End quote. What they tried to say was, quote, that the figure of Jesus cannot be understood simply from his inner-worldly context. In mythological language, this means he stems from eternity.

His origin is not a human and natural one. Close quote. In ordinary language, here's what it really means.

In this man, who himself was an ordinary man, talk about Christology from below, his father and mother were well known to his contemporaries, the salvation of God is present. In theological language, it means this. This man is the great eschatological event that can bring us to a believing self-understanding.

The new approach means an enormous transformation of the biblical message. Undoubtedly, there are many biblical motifs present in Pope Monte's theology, but it's also obvious his Christology is entirely different from that of the creeds. Herman Sassa once formulated it thus: the sarcasm is deserved; I'm sorry.

Jesus Christ was not conceived by the Holy Spirit, was not born of the Virgin Mary. He did not suffer; he suffered under Pontius Pilate. He was crucified, dead, and buried, but he did not descend into hell, did not rise again from the dead, did not ascend into heaven, sits not at the right hand of God the Father, and shall not come again to judge the living and the dead.

All that we can say is that somehow in him, the eschatological event of salvation took place. A fact that was discovered by his disciples sometime after his death, and that's what's known as the resurrection. It is a sad fact to me that this was the most important person in New Testament studies in the 20th century.

And yet the pendulum had swung so far, it had to swing back, and it did. But before we go there, J. A. T. Robinson is somewhat famous. I know him out of order, and I'll get to Hans Kung and Karl Rahner.

His honesty to God shocked the British populace when he actually used the demythologizing program in a common language. Modern man knows only one reality, namely this universe; there's only one way of thinking and speaking about God, not in terms of him being out there, but of depth. God is the ground of our being.

He is in fact being itself. This sounds like Paul Tillich's radical Christology, theology. But even this was not the end.

Others went still further and propounded a God is dead theology, which meant the traditional notions about God were fallacious and to be rejected. The context of the new Christological concentration is the atheism of modern man. After Auschwitz, modern man no longer believes in God, at least not in traditional Western theism.

Indeed, this God is dead. I'll return to Robinson, but his honest to God shook the Brits and made many of them confuse many people and even depressed people who felt they could no longer believe in the Jesus they had learned about in Sunday school and from Anglican prelates who preached the word of God. Two significant figures in the second half of the 20th century were Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann.

Pannenberg, in his major work, *Jesus, God and Man*, said methodologically, we have to prefer a Christology from below to one from above. He's trying to communicate to modern people. And that's why I used the distinction earlier between an absolute Christology from below and a relative one.

He starts from below, but he works his way historically to the empty tomb, believes in the confession of Jesus, and ends up affirming the traditional view of the incarnation. Why did he start from below? Such an approach presupposes the divinity of Jesus. It makes it difficult to recognize the distinctive features of the real historical man, Jesus of Nazareth.

It virtually adopts the position of God himself by concentrating upon the way God's son came into the world. This rejection of the approach from above does not mean that Pannenberg rejects the idea of incarnation altogether and that he regards the incarnation of Christology as a total mistake. In fact, he himself also accepts the concept of incarnation, but he sees it as a mistake of traditional Christology that it took this concept as a starting point rather than as the goal of Christology.

I will argue that John and Paul took it as their starting point and that we can do the same thing, although I do appreciate many of Pannenberg's conclusions. Pannenberg also believes that Jesus is the son of God, but in order to discover this, we must start from below, that is, with the historical Jesus. But can we really know this activity and the fate of the man Jesus over against Bultmann in agreement with the post-Bultmannians who reacted to his extreme skepticism, Pannenberg maintains we can indeed go back behind the apostolic preaching, the kerygma, their message to the historical Jesus?

It is clear from the Gospels that Jesus' immediate context was that of Jewish apocalyptic expectation. Jesus expected the absolute end of history with the general resurrection of the dead, the appearance of the heavenly son of man, and the beginning of the last judgment. Within his framework, Jesus fulfilled his office to call men into the kingdom of God which had appeared in him.

It's evident from all of this that Jesus made a tremendous claim of authority. He claimed no less than to speak with the authority of God himself. At the same time, this claim had a proleptic structure.

It needed future vindication by God himself. This is sort of the genius of his approach. Jesus' expectation of this vindication, however, seemed to become one great failure.

For by the leaders of his own people, he was condemned and subsequently executed as a rebel by the Romans. He died on the cross. But three days later, the great miracle happened.

God raised him from the dead and thus vindicated him and his claim. True, the final end of history did not yet come, but Jesus' resurrection can mean nothing else than the proleptic anticipation of this end. At the same time, it also became manifest who Jesus really is.

In the resurrection, the Christology from below issues in an eschatological Christology in which it becomes clear that, quote, as this man, as a man in this particular unique situation with this particular historical mission and this particular fate, as this man, Jesus is not just man, but from the perspective of his resurrection from the dead, he is one with God and is himself God. That's a quotation from Pannenberg. But is this not in conflict with what we read about the historical Jesus who regarded himself as entirely subordinate to the Father? Pannenberg's answer is that this subordination is, in retrospect, the expression of Jesus' essential unity as a son with the Father.

As the one wholly dedicated to the Father, Jesus is the revealer of God's divinity and belongs inseparably to God's essence. Thus, already in his pre-Easter life, Jesus was

the son of God, although he was not yet recognizable as such. Yes, the legend of the virgin birth affirms he was a son of God from the beginning.

What is even more, we can speak of his pre-existence. God was always one with Jesus, even prior to his earthly birth. Ultimately, we can speak of Jesus only in terms of incarnation.

The concept of incarnation, even though we cannot take it as our starting point in Christology, nevertheless affirms a truth that cannot be abandoned. All of them are quotations from Pannenberg. In Jesus, God himself has come out of his otherness into our world, into human form, in such a way that the father-son relation that, as we know in retrospect, always belonged to God's essence, now acquired corporeal form.

I say something similar in the doctrine of the Trinity. We know God has always existed as the Holy Trinity, but we learned that in the incarnation of the Son. We don't learn it from the Old Testament in itself.

Oh, you can find anticipations, it seems to me, but rather you notice them looking backward from the resurrection of Jesus. So, it's in the incarnation we understand God is two in one. It's at Pentecost that we understand God is three in one, and we correctly read that back into eternity, which is, in fact, based upon certain New Testament statements.

Pannenberg asserts that, quote, the distinction that Jesus maintained between himself and the Father also belongs to the Trinity of God. Thus, Pannenberg's Christology from below issues in a fully-fledged doctrine of the Trinity. But does this not mean that, again, the humanity of Jesus, the true humanity, is swallowed up by the true deity? Pannenberg goes back to the 6th century doctrine of Leontius of Byzantium, emphasizing the impersonal humanity of Christ and the impersonal humanity.

He's orthodox, in other words. But he hastens to explain this does not mean a partition of Jesus into two natures. He does not accept that terminology.

Rather, he speaks of two complementary aspects. Klaus Runia evaluates and says, actually, these words of Pannenberg, which I'm not going to read, it's too much detail, is nothing but the ancient doctrine of the impersonal humanity of Christ. That is, there was no mere man.

Jesus, God, came and indwelt. And the impersonal humanity of Christ, that is, from the very beginning of his humanity in Mary's womb, his humanity was impersonal by union with the Son, or the Word, in her womb. Evaluation by Klaus Runia.

It's evident that Pannenberg's Christology, though starting from below, that is, from the historical Jesus, through the turning point of the resurrection, ultimately comes very close to the classical Christology. It may be true that he does not want to speak of two natures and prefers to speak of the indirect identity of two complementary total aspects of Jesus' existence, but this does not alter the fact that his view is a variant of the Chalcedonian tradition. An important aspect of Pannenberg's Christology is his decision to develop a Christology from below.

We believe such an approach has definite merits. For one thing, it takes the historicity of Jesus seriously. For another, it takes his resurrection seriously as a great turning point in Jesus' life and work.

At the same time, we cannot overlook the fact that Pannenberg adopts a rather critical attitude to the biblical data about Jesus and often uses the historical-critical method to get rid of conflicting evidence. Thus, the virgin birth, which does not fit too well with his approach from below, is labeled a legend. Likewise, the self-consciousness of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, which in the Gospels is attributed to Jesus, is denied.

Klaas Runia expresses an appreciation for at least Pannenberg's version of a Christology from below to communicate to moderns as part of his strategy. He thinks that there can be some value to that, although he critiques Pannenberg's rejections of part of the biblical witness. But then he adds, however, I believe we who are living after Paul and John have to complement a Christology from below by a Christology from above.

I heartily agree with that. Finally, Pannenberg's insistence in the Christology from below must also be the reason why he ultimately comes to an eschatological enhypostasis of all men. In Jesus, the essence of God and the essence of man are integrated.

This happened in the particularity of Jesus' historical life, Pannenberg says, but then he immediately adds that in the future, this integration will extend to all human reality. One wonders whether, in this way, the Christology from below does not issue in a deification of human beings, as a matter of fact, in a universalism. Of course, I take issue with Pannenberg on this point and, in fact, reject it.

So, a mixed evaluation, but even though Barth was better than the old liberals and Bultmann is a tremendous falling away Barth's much more acceptable, although not totally orthodox. Even so, compared to Bultmann, Pannenberg is much better and in fact is better than Bultmann to which we will return in our next lecture.

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