

## **Dr. Robert C. Newman, Miracles, Session 3, Liberalism on Miracles Resources from NotebookLM**

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

### **1. Abstract of Newman, Miracles, Session 3, Liberalism on Miracles, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL**

This excerpt from Dr. Newman's lecture series explores the historical context surrounding the understanding of miracles, tracing a path from the Renaissance rediscovery of classical thought and the Reformation's focus on biblical text to the rise of modern science with figures like Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, and Newton. The text argues that the success of scientific explanations based on natural law contributed to a philosophical climate that questioned or rejected miraculous events, exemplified by thinkers such as Spinoza, Hume, and Kant. This intellectual shift, combined with Protestant skepticism towards Catholic miracles and a preference for moral over revelational religion, ultimately fostered the development of theological liberalism in 19th-century Germany, which then spread and influenced subsequent religious and intellectual landscapes.

**2. 14 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of  
Dr. Newman, Miracles, Session 3 – Double click icon to play in  
Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL]  
Site and click the audio podcast link there (New Testament →  
NT Introduction → Miracles).**



**Newman\_Miracles\_  
Session03.mp3**

### 3. Briefing Document: Newman, Miracles, Session 3, Liberalism on Miracles

#### Briefing Document: Science, Liberalism, and the Rejection of Miracles

**Overview:** This document summarizes the main themes and important ideas presented in Dr. Robert C. Newman's lecture, "Science and Liberalism on Miracles." The session traces the historical developments from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment to the rise of theological liberalism, highlighting how these movements contributed to a growing skepticism and eventual rejection of the miraculous, particularly within Christian thought.

#### Main Themes and Important Ideas:

##### 1. The Renaissance and Reformation: Seeds of Change:

- **Rediscovery of Classical Knowledge:** The fall of Constantinople led to the influx of Greek classical texts into Western Europe, broadening intellectual horizons beyond medieval Christian, Islamic, and Jewish frameworks. This reintroduction exposed scholars to ancient philosophy, science, ethics, and accounts of pagan miracles, prompting a comparative perspective.
- **Quote:** "Europeans thus became aware of what these ancient authors really thought and taught, correcting distorted information that had come down through the Middle Ages... Scholars became aware of the nature of miracle accounts from ancient paganism."
- **The Reformation's Emphasis on Scripture:** The Reformation spurred a renewed focus on the Bible as the primary source of religious authority, contrasting with centuries of medieval Catholic tradition. This led to a critical examination of miracles, with some realizing that medieval and modern Catholic miracles differed from those described in the Bible.
- **Quote:** "One result of this study was a realization that medieval and modern Catholic miracles had a different flavor than those of the Bible."
- **Early Seeds of Skepticism towards Continued Miracles:** The Catholic emphasis on ongoing miracles associated with holy figures led some Protestants to question the continuation of miracles altogether.

## 2. The Scientific Revolution: A New Understanding of the Natural World:

- **Challenging Aristotelian Cosmology:** The work of Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler overturned the earth-centered model of the universe established by Aristotle, paving the way for modern scientific thought.
- **Quote:** "...it was the work of Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler which showed that Aristotle's earth-centered cosmology was wrong, and paved the way for the rise of modern science."
- **Newtonian Physics and the Reign of Natural Law:** Isaac Newton's groundbreaking work established universal laws of motion and gravity, providing a comprehensive explanation for many natural phenomena. While Newton himself was a Christian who believed in God's ability to intervene miraculously, his work led some to believe that the natural world operated entirely according to fixed laws, diminishing the perceived need for divine intervention.
- **Quote:** "Newton himself was a professing Christian... He believed in God, the creator, who could miraculously intervene in nature... But many who came after him felt that he explained so much of reality in terms of law that God was not needed."
- **Rise of Deism:** Newton's emphasis on natural law contributed to the rise of Deism in England and later the *Philosophes* movement in France. Deists believed in a creator God but denied his active involvement in the world, including miracles.

## 3. The Philosophical Underpinnings of Rejecting Miracles:

- **Spinoza's Pantheism:** Benedict Spinoza argued for a pantheistic view where God and nature are synonymous, and natural laws are God's unchangeable decrees, thus rendering miracles impossible by definition.
- **Quote:** "Spinoza, adopting a pantheistic outlook, argued that nature and God were two different words for the same thing, that natural law and God's decrees were likewise the same, that God's decrees are unchangeable, and therefore miracles are impossible by definition."
- **Hume's Empiricism:** David Hume attacked miracles from an empirical standpoint, asserting that natural laws are based on consistent experience, and miracles, by definition, violate these laws. He argued that one should only accept a miraculous explanation if a non-miraculous one is even more improbable.

- **Quote:** "He argued that our natural laws are based on firm and unalterable experience and that miracles, by definition, violate natural law. Therefore, we ought never to accept a miraculous explanation for an event unless a non-miraculous explanation would be even more unlikely."
- **Kant's Transcendental Idealism:** Immanuel Kant argued that human knowledge is limited to appearances and not to things-in-themselves, rendering theological and metaphysical claims, including those about miracles, unwarranted speculation. He relegated God to the realm of practical reason and moral duty, where miracles were deemed irrelevant.
- **Quote:** "Immanuel Kant, 1724-1804, argued that man has access only to appearances and not to things as they really are, so that all theology and metaphysics were unwarranted speculation... Such a religion, a form of deism, needs no attestation by miracles..."

#### 4. The Rise and Spread of Theological Liberalism:

- **Motivations and Characteristics:** Theological liberalism emerged in 19th-century Germany as a self-proclaimed more Christian alternative to Deism and atheism. It sought to maintain the ethical teachings of Christianity and the Bible, particularly the New Testament and the life of Jesus.
- **Rejection of the Miraculous in Biblical Interpretation:** Liberal theologians sought to reinterpret scripture in ways that avoided the miraculous. This involved:
  - Rewriting the life of Jesus to remove supernatural elements.
  - Redating biblical books to place prophecy after the events it described.
  - Postulating multiple sources and editors for biblical texts.
  - Acknowledging the possibility of fictitious narratives and pseudonymous authorship within scripture.
- **Quote:** "It is seen in the attempts to rewrite the life of Jesus along liberal lines, also to avoid the miraculous in sacred history by redating biblical books, postulating diverse sources and editors, having prophecy written after the event, and admitting fictitious narratives and false authorship into scripture."
- **Spread and Influence:** Liberalism spread from Germany to Britain and the United States in the latter 19th century, gaining significant traction in universities, theological seminaries, and mainline denominations. It has become the dominant

intellectual and cultural perspective in many Western societies and has influenced mission fields.

- **Quote:** "It came to dominate first the universities, then the theological seminaries, and finally the mainline denominations. It is the orthodoxy of most intellectual and cultural leaders in the United States and Europe today."
- **Impact on Common Believers and Other Groups:** While less popular among the general populace in the US, liberalism has exerted influence even on more conservative Christian groups through mixture. Various cults and new age movements have also adopted aspects of liberal thought.

### **Conclusion:**

Dr. Newman argues that the rejection of miracles, the central topic of the lecture series, is deeply intertwined with the rise of modern science and theological liberalism. The Renaissance and Reformation laid the groundwork for questioning traditional authorities, while the Scientific Revolution provided a framework emphasizing natural laws, which seemed to diminish the need for divine intervention. Philosophers like Spinoza, Hume, and Kant offered intellectual justifications for rejecting the miraculous. Theological liberalism built upon these developments, seeking to reinterpret Christianity in a way that accommodated scientific and philosophical skepticism, ultimately leading to a widespread questioning and denial of miracles within many intellectual and cultural circles.

## 4. Study Guide: Newman, Miracles, Session 3, Liberalism on Miracles

### The Rise of Science and Theological Liberalism: A Study Guide

#### Quiz

1. How did the rediscovery of Greek classical authors during the Renaissance influence European thought beyond just the arts and humanities? What was one specific consequence of this rediscovery related to religious understanding?
2. Explain how the Reformation contributed to a different perspective on miracles compared to medieval Catholicism. What key aspect of Catholic belief regarding miracles was challenged?
3. Describe the contributions of Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler to the shift away from an earth-centered cosmology. Why was this shift significant for the development of modern science?
4. What were Isaac Newton's key scientific achievements, and what was his personal belief regarding God and miracles? How did his work inadvertently contribute to a different theological perspective among some of his successors?
5. Briefly explain Benedict Spinoza's philosophical argument against the possibility of miracles. What was the foundational idea underpinning his rejection?
6. Summarize David Hume's empirical argument against accepting the occurrence of miracles. What principle did he emphasize when evaluating claims of the miraculous?
7. According to Immanuel Kant, what are the limitations of human understanding regarding metaphysical and theological claims? How did this view affect the perceived relevance of miracles?
8. Identify the four main contributing factors within Protestant circles that led to the rise of theological liberalism in the 19th century.
9. Describe some of the key characteristics and goals of 19th-century German theological liberalism. What aspects of traditional Christianity did it seek to reinterpret?

10. How did Darwinism contribute to the spread of theological liberalism in the latter part of the 19th century? What sectors of society were initially most affected by this spread?

### **Answer Key**

1. The rediscovery stimulated European universities and broadened intellectual horizons, extending to philosophy, science, ethics, history, and more. It also reintroduced ancient pagan perspectives and raised awareness of miracle accounts from other religions, prompting comparisons with Christian beliefs.
2. The Reformation, with its emphasis on sola scriptura, led to a renewed focus on the biblical accounts of miracles and a critical evaluation of medieval and modern Catholic miracles, which were perceived as having a different character. The Catholic teaching that miracles continued through holy individuals was a key point of divergence.
3. Copernicus proposed a heliocentric model, Galileo provided telescopic evidence against Aristotelian cosmology, and Kepler described planetary motion through laws. This shift undermined the authority of ancient science and paved the way for empirical observation and mathematical reasoning as the basis of modern science.
4. Newton developed a new telescope, discovered the spectrum of light, invented calculus, and explained Kepler's laws with universal laws of motion and gravity. He was a professing Christian who believed in a creator God capable of miraculous intervention. However, his emphasis on natural laws led some to believe God was unnecessary to explain the universe, fostering Deism.
5. Spinoza adopted a pantheistic view, equating God and nature and their laws. He argued that God's decrees (natural laws) are immutable; therefore, miracles, being violations of these laws, are impossible by definition.
6. Hume argued that natural laws are based on consistent experience, while miracles, by definition, contradict this experience. He asserted that a miraculous explanation should only be considered if a non-miraculous one would be even more improbable.
7. Kant claimed that human understanding is limited to appearances (phenomena) and cannot access things-in-themselves (noumena), rendering theology and metaphysics speculative. He relegated God to the realm of practical reason and morality, making miracles irrelevant to genuine religious life.

8. The four factors were: a Protestant reaction against Catholic miracle accounts, a scientific skepticism towards irregular events, a philosophical rejection of miracles (deductively impossible, inductively unwarranted, or practically irrelevant), and a Deistic emphasis on moral rather than revelational religion.
9. German theological liberalism sought to provide a more Christian alternative to Deism and atheism, emphasizing the moral teachings of Christianity and the New Testament, particularly the life of Jesus. It often reinterpreted biblical narratives to remove miraculous elements through methods like redating books and postulating multiple sources.
10. Darwinism, with its emphasis on natural selection and evolutionary processes, provided a framework for understanding the natural world without supernatural intervention. This aligned with liberal theologians' desire to explain phenomena through naturalistic means and contributed to liberalism's acceptance in universities, seminaries, and mainline denominations.

## Essay Format Questions

1. Analyze the interconnectedness between the rise of modern science during the Renaissance and Enlightenment and the subsequent development of theological liberalism's skepticism towards miracles. In what specific ways did scientific advancements and the philosophical interpretations thereof challenge traditional understandings of divine intervention?
2. Compare and contrast the philosophical arguments of Spinoza, Hume, and Kant regarding the impossibility or irrelevance of miracles. What are the core tenets of each philosopher's position, and what are their differing bases for rejecting or downplaying the significance of the miraculous?
3. Discuss the impact of theological liberalism on biblical interpretation and the understanding of sacred history. Provide specific examples of how liberal approaches sought to reinterpret or explain away miraculous events described in the Bible.
4. Evaluate the claim that theological liberalism represents a "more Christian alternative" to Deism and atheism. In what ways did it attempt to retain elements of Christian tradition, and where did it fundamentally diverge from orthodox Christian beliefs?
5. Explore the reasons for the differing levels of acceptance of theological liberalism between intellectual and cultural leaders and the common people. What factors might account for this disparity, and what are some potential consequences of this divergence?

## Glossary of Key Terms

- **Renaissance:** A period in European history, roughly from the 14th to the 16th century, characterized by a renewed interest in classical art, literature, and learning.
- **Reformation:** A 16th-century movement for religious reform, leading to the establishment of Protestant churches as distinct from the Roman Catholic Church.
- **Heresies:** Beliefs or opinions contrary to orthodox religious (especially Christian) doctrine.
- **Syncretism:** The amalgamation or attempted amalgamation of different religions, cultures, or schools of thought.
- **Cosmology:** The science of the origin and development of the universe. Modern astronomy is concerned with the parts of the universe outside the earth's atmosphere.
- **Aryanism (in this context):** A historical theological viewpoint that denied the full divinity of Jesus Christ, considering him a created being subordinate to God the Father.
- **Deism:** An Enlightenment-era belief in a God who created the universe but does not intervene in its affairs. Deists typically reject miracles and revealed religion.
- **Pantheism:** The belief that God is identical with the universe and everything in it.
- **Empirical:** Based on or verifiable by observation or experience rather than theory or logic.
- **Metaphysics:** The branch of philosophy that deals with the first principles of things, including abstract concepts such as being, knowing, substance, cause, identity, time, and space.
- **Theological Liberalism:** A movement that emerged in the 19th century, primarily within Protestantism, that sought to reconcile Christian faith with modern science, reason, and historical criticism, often leading to a skepticism towards traditional doctrines like the miraculous.
- **Darwinism:** The theory of the evolution of species by natural selection developed by Charles Darwin.

## 5. FAQs on Newman, Miracles, Session 3, Liberalism on Miracles, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

### Frequently Asked Questions: Science, Liberalism, and the Rejection of Miracles

**1. How did the Renaissance contribute to a shift in perspectives that eventually impacted views on miracles?** The Renaissance, marked by the rediscovery of classical Greek and Hebrew texts following the fall of Constantinople, broadened European intellectual horizons beyond medieval Christian, Islamic, and Jewish thought. This exposure introduced ancient pagan philosophies and highlighted differing accounts of miracles in other cultures. Simultaneously, the Reformation, with its emphasis on the direct study of the Bible, led to a critical re-evaluation of medieval Catholic miracles compared to those described in scripture, fostering skepticism towards the continuation of miracles.

**2. What role did the Scientific Revolution, particularly the work of figures like Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler, and Newton, play in the changing attitudes towards the miraculous?** The Scientific Revolution, spearheaded by these individuals, replaced the Aristotelian earth-centered cosmology with a heliocentric model and established laws governing the natural world. Newton's laws of motion and gravity provided comprehensive explanations for many physical phenomena, leading some to believe that the universe operated according to fixed laws, potentially diminishing the perceived need for divine intervention and miracles. While Newton himself believed in a creator who *could* intervene, his successors increasingly emphasized the self-sufficiency of natural laws.

**3. Who were the key philosophical figures who provided intellectual justification for rejecting miracles, and what were their main arguments?** Benedict Spinoza, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant were pivotal in philosophically challenging the concept of miracles. Spinoza, with his pantheistic view, equated God with nature and natural law, rendering miracles impossible as they would require God to act against his own unchangeable decrees. Hume, from an empiricist standpoint, argued that our overwhelming experience of natural laws being consistent provides strong evidence against miracles, suggesting we should only accept a miracle if a non-miraculous explanation is even more improbable. Kant, focusing on the limits of human understanding, asserted that we can only access appearances and not ultimate reality, thus deeming theological and metaphysical claims, including those about miracles, to be speculative and irrelevant to practical moral life.

**4. What were the primary factors that led to the rise of theological liberalism in the 19th century?** Theological liberalism emerged from a confluence of factors: a Protestant reaction against perceived excesses and differing nature of Catholic miracle claims, a growing scientific worldview that favored natural explanations over supernatural ones, philosophical arguments that deemed miracles impossible, unwarranted, or irrelevant, and a deistic inclination to prioritize moral religion over revelational religion supported by miracles.

**5. What were some of the characteristics and approaches of early theological liberalism in its interpretation of the Bible and Christian history?** Early theological liberalism sought to reconcile Christianity with modern thought by reinterpreting the Bible and Christian history. This involved efforts to demythologize the life of Jesus, often minimizing or rejecting the miraculous elements. It also employed historical-critical methods, such as redating biblical books, proposing multiple authors and sources, suggesting prophecies were written after the events they described, and even acknowledging the presence of fictional narratives within scripture, all to provide non-miraculous explanations for biblical accounts.

**6. How did theological liberalism spread and what impact did Darwinism have on this spread?** Originating in 19th-century Germany, theological liberalism expanded to Britain and the United States, gaining significant traction in the latter part of the century. Darwinism, with its theory of evolution providing a naturalistic explanation for the development of life, further bolstered the liberal inclination towards naturalistic explanations and contributed to the questioning of traditional religious beliefs, including miracles.

**7. What has been the general reception and influence of theological liberalism in society, particularly in the United States?** While theological liberalism has gained considerable influence among intellectual and cultural leaders, dominating universities, theological seminaries, and mainline denominations, it has generally been less popular among the common populace in the United States. Nevertheless, its ideas have permeated even more conservative Christian groups through various forms of mixture, and many of its teachings have been adopted by cults and new age movements.

**8. According to the source, what is the fundamental connection between the rise of science, liberalism, and the topic of miracles?** The source emphasizes that the rise of modern science, with its focus on natural laws and explanations, and theological liberalism, with its inclination towards rationalism and historical-critical methods, are fundamentally linked to a rejection of the miraculous. The Scientific Revolution provided a framework where natural phenomena could be understood without invoking supernatural intervention, while philosophical and theological liberalism offered intellectual justifications for doubting or dismissing miracle accounts, ultimately leading to a worldview where miracles are seen as either impossible, unnecessary, or irrelevant.