

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

Resources from NotebookLM

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

1. Abstract of Peterson, Christology, Session 7, Modern Christology, Part 2, Barth, Bultmann, Pannenberg, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This text, from a lecture on Christology by Dr. Robert Peterson, examines the **modern theological perspectives** of Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Wolfhart Pannenberg. **Barth is presented as a figure who reaffirmed classical Christology** in reaction to liberal theology, though with caveats regarding universalism and his doctrine of scripture. **Bultmann's radical program of demythologizing the New Testament** and his existentialist interpretation are critiqued for undermining core Christian doctrines. Finally, **Pannenberg's "Christology from below,"** which starts with the historical Jesus and moves toward affirming the incarnation, is explored with both appreciation and reservations about its potential for universalism and its handling of biblical data.

2. 28 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Peterson, Christology, Session 7 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Theology → Theology, Peterson → Christology).



Peterson_Christology_Session07.mp3

3. Briefing Document: Peterson, Salvation, Session 7, Modern Christology, Part 2, Barth, Bultmann, Pannenberg

Briefing Document: Modern Christology - Barth, Bultmann, and Pannenberg

Overview: This briefing document summarizes the key themes and important ideas presented by Dr. Robert A. Peterson in Session 7 of his Christology lectures, focusing on the modern theological contributions of Karl Barth, Rudolf Bultmann, and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Peterson provides an overview of their approaches to Christology, highlighting their agreements and disagreements with classical orthodoxy, as well as offering his own critical evaluations.

I. Karl Barth:

- **Centrality of Christology:** Peterson emphasizes that for Barth, Christology was the central and determining factor in all of theology. Barth consciously reacted against liberal theology and affirmed the classical orthodox statements on the person of Christ from the first five centuries. He believed that a true church dogmatics must be fundamentally Christological: *"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."*
- **Christological Concentration:** Barth aimed for a thoroughgoing Christological concentration across the entire range of systematic theology. He viewed Jesus Christ as the beginning of all God's ways and works, with God's election of the God-man Jesus Christ being foundational.
- **Election in Christ:** Peterson highlights Barth's unique understanding of election, where Jesus himself is seen as both the elect and reprobate man for everyone. While acknowledging its brilliance, Peterson critiques this view for its tendency towards universalism, a conclusion Barth himself denied. He states, *"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."* Peterson contrasts this with the traditional understanding of Ephesians 1, where individuals are chosen *in* Christ.

- **Christomonism:** Barth's intense focus on Christ led to accusations of "Christomonism," potentially compromising other aspects of theology. Peterson acknowledges some truth to this criticism, particularly regarding Barth's denial of natural revelation in creation. Peterson argues that passages like Psalm 19 and Romans 1 clearly teach God's revelation through creation.
- **Affirmation of Classical Orthodoxy:** Despite his unique interpretations, Barth wholeheartedly accepted the Christology of the ancient church, including the Chalcedonian Definition (very God and very man). He defended Chalcedon against accusations of intellectualism, stating that the council *"did not intend to solve the mystery of revelation...but rather, it perceives and respects the mystery."* He even saw the formula of Chalcedon as an exegesis of John 1:14.
- **Virgin Birth and Empty Tomb:** Barth strongly affirmed the virgin birth and the empty tomb as crucial "signposts" at the beginning and end of Jesus' life, criticizing those who denied them, such as Emil Brunner. He saw Brunner's denial of the virgin birth as *"a bad business. It casts his whole theology in a negative light."*
- **Doctrine of the Trinity:** Barth also wholeheartedly accepted the classical doctrine of the Trinity, deriving it from the revelation in Jesus Christ. He emphasized that God is triune in his innermost being (ontological/immanent Trinity), not just in his actions in the world (economic Trinity). He described the Trinity as God being the *"revealer...revelation...and revealedness."*
- **Potential for Patripassianism:** Peterson notes that some of Barth's statements, particularly regarding the passion of Jesus as the action and passion of God himself, bordered on patripassianism, a heresy Barth denied.
- **Shift in Later Years:** Peterson observes a shift in Barth's later thinking, with a greater emphasis on Jesus as the true representative of humankind and the human partner of God.
- **Overall Assessment:** Peterson presents a largely positive view of Barth while acknowledging significant problems like the tendency towards universalism and the denial of natural revelation. He recognizes Barth's crucial role in the revival of interest in classical Christology.

II. Rudolf Bultmann:

- **Radical Critical Approach:** Peterson describes Bultmann as a "genius" and influential scholar who approached the New Testament from a radical, critical perspective, utilizing form criticism and the religio-historical school. Bultmann believed the New Testament writings were products of early Christian communities and contained "legendary elements" influenced by non-Christian religions like mystery religions and proto-Gnosticism. Peterson strongly refutes the idea of pre-Christian Gnosticism.
- **Demythologizing Program:** Bultmann's central project was the "demythologizing" of the New Testament to make its message palatable to modern people who could no longer accept its "mythological framework," including a three-decker universe, literal miracles, a literal incarnation, atonement, resurrection, and ascension. He believed the task was to reinterpret these myths to uncover the religious experiences they expressed.
- **Existentialist Interpretation:** Bultmann translated the New Testament's message about Jesus and his work into anthropological (human-centered) and existential categories, heavily influenced by Heidegger. For Bultmann, theological knowledge was simultaneously knowledge about ourselves. He believed every assertion about Christ was also an assertion about man and vice versa.
- **Rejection of Key Doctrines:** Peterson highlights Bultmann's denial of core Christian doctrines, including the incarnation, the deity of Christ, miracles, heaven and hell, the literal resurrection of Jesus, and the second coming. Peterson expresses his dismay at this, stating that even a child with faith knows the Father and Son in a way Bultmann did not.
- **Anthropological Christology:** Bultmann viewed Jesus not as the God-man but as a historical figure whose significance lay in the "eschatological event of salvation" discovered by his disciples after his death (the "resurrection"). He rejected the mythological interpretations of Jesus' pre-existence and miraculous birth. He famously stated that Jesus *"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."*

- **Influence and Decline:** Despite his radical views, Bultmann became the most influential New Testament scholar of the 20th century after World War II. However, Peterson notes that the theological pendulum eventually swung back against his extreme skepticism.

III. Wolfhart Pannenberg:

- **Christology from Below:** Pannenberg advocated for a "Christology from below," starting with the historical Jesus and working upwards to affirm his divinity. This methodological preference was aimed at communicating with modern people. However, Peterson points out the potential difficulty in recognizing Jesus' distinctive features with this approach.
- **Historical Jesus and Apocalyptic Expectation:** Pannenberg emphasized the importance of the historical Jesus, arguing against Bultmann that we can go back behind the apostolic preaching. He situated Jesus within the context of Jewish apocalyptic expectation, where Jesus claimed divine authority that needed future vindication.
- **Resurrection as Vindication:** The resurrection of Jesus was central for Pannenberg, seen as God's vindication of Jesus' claims and the proleptic anticipation of the end of history. It was in the resurrection that it became clear that Jesus, *"as this man...is not just man, but from the perspective of his resurrection from the dead, he is one with God and is himself God."*
- **Eschatological Christology:** Pannenberg's Christology from below ultimately led to an eschatological Christology, where the significance of Jesus is understood in light of the coming eschatological reality.
- **Trinity and Incarnation as Goal:** While starting from below, Pannenberg ultimately affirmed the Trinity and the incarnation, viewing them not as the starting point but as the goal of Christology. He believed the Father-Son relation, always part of God's essence, acquired corporeal form in Jesus.
- **Impersonal Humanity of Christ:** Pannenberg utilized the 6th-century doctrine of Leontius of Byzantium regarding the impersonal humanity of Christ, emphasizing that Jesus was not a mere man but that his humanity was impersonal by union with the Logos from the beginning.
- **Critical Use of Historical-Critical Method:** Peterson notes that Pannenberg, despite emphasizing the historical Jesus, adopted a critical attitude towards

certain biblical data, such as the virgin birth and Jesus' self-consciousness as Messiah and Son of God, labeling them as legends.

- **Eschatological Enhypostasis and Potential Universalism:** Peterson expresses concern over Pannenberg's idea of an "eschatological enhypostasis of all men," suggesting a potential for deification of humanity and universalism, which Peterson rejects.
- **Overall Assessment:** Peterson offers a more favorable evaluation of Pannenberg compared to Bultmann, noting that his Christology, despite starting from below, comes close to classical Christology. He appreciates the seriousness given to the historicity of Jesus and the resurrection. However, he critiques Pannenberg's rejection of certain biblical witnesses and his tendency towards universalism.

Conclusion:

Peterson's lecture provides a valuable overview of three significant figures in modern Christology. He highlights Barth's Christ-centered theology and reaffirmation of classical orthodoxy, while also noting his problematic tendencies. He strongly critiques Bultmann's radical demythologizing and denial of core Christian doctrines. Finally, he offers a more nuanced assessment of Pannenberg's Christology from below, appreciating its engagement with the historical Jesus and the resurrection, but also pointing out its critical approach to Scripture and potential for universalism. Ultimately, Peterson suggests that a complete Christology requires both a "Christology from below" and a "Christology from above," a perspective seemingly aligned more closely with Barth and the classical tradition than with Bultmann's radical revisionism.

4. Study Guide: Peterson, Salvation, Session 7, Modern Christology, Part 2, Barth, Bultmann, Pannenberg

Modern Christology: Barth, Bultmann, and Pannenberg

Quiz

Answer the following questions in 2-3 sentences each, based on the provided lecture excerpts.

1. What was Karl Barth's primary theological focus and how did it contrast with the liberal theology he encountered?
2. Describe Barth's understanding of election. What potential problem did some theologians identify with this view?
3. According to the lecture, what was Rudolf Bultmann's central theological approach, and what did he believe about the historical accuracy of the New Testament?
4. Explain Bultmann's program of "demythologizing" the New Testament. What was his goal in undertaking this project?
5. What was Wolfhart Pannenberg's methodological approach to Christology, and why did he choose this starting point?
6. How did Pannenberg understand the significance of Jesus' resurrection for his identity and claims?
7. In what ways did Pannenberg's Christology ultimately align with classical Christology despite his "Christology from below" approach?
8. What were some criticisms raised against Pannenberg's "Christology from below" by the lecturer?
9. Identify one significant point of disagreement between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, as discussed in the lecture.
10. Briefly explain the lecturer's overall assessment of the Christological contributions of Barth, Bultmann, and Pannenberg in relation to orthodox Christianity.

Answer Key

1. Karl Barth's primary theological focus was Christology, which he considered central to all of theology. In conscious reaction to the liberal theology of his time,

he affirmed the classical orthodox statements of the first five centuries on the person of Christ.

2. Barth understood election to mean that Jesus Christ himself is the elect and reprobate man for everyone, chosen before the foundation of the world. Some theologians identified a tendency toward universalism as a potential problem with this view, despite Barth's denial.
3. Rudolf Bultmann's central theological approach involved demythologizing the New Testament and interpreting its message through an existentialist lens. He believed the New Testament writings were not factual history but rather products of early Christian communities with added legendary elements.
4. Bultmann's program of demythologizing aimed to reinterpret the mythological elements of the New Testament to make its message understandable and relevant to modern people who could no longer accept a literal worldview. He sought to uncover the religious experiences these myths attempted to express.
5. Wolfhart Pannenberg's methodological approach to Christology was a "Christology from below," starting with the historical Jesus. He chose this approach to communicate to modern people and because he believed the divinity of Jesus should be the goal, not the starting point, of Christology.
6. Pannenberg understood Jesus' resurrection as God's vindication of Jesus and his claims, representing a proleptic anticipation of the final end of history. The resurrection revealed Jesus' true identity as not just man, but as one with God.
7. Despite his "Christology from below," Pannenberg ultimately affirmed the incarnation and the pre-existence of Christ, coming very close to classical Christology, even utilizing the concept of the impersonal humanity of Christ. His view is considered a variant of the Chalcedonian tradition.
8. Criticisms raised against Pannenberg's "Christology from below" included his critical attitude towards biblical data (e.g., the virgin birth), his denial of Jesus' self-consciousness as Messiah, and the concern that his approach might lead to a deification of humanity and universalism.
9. A significant point of disagreement between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner was over natural revelation and natural theology. Barth strongly denied God's revelation in creation, insisting all revelation is in Christ, while Brunner held a different view, albeit with terminology that Barth found problematic.

10. The lecturer views Barth as a significant improvement over old liberalism, affirming classical Christology, though with some potential issues like universalism. Bultmann is seen as a radical departure and a "tremendous falling away" due to his denial of core Christian doctrines. Pannenberg is considered much better than Bultmann, ultimately aligning closely with classical Christology despite his chosen methodology.

Essay Format Questions

1. Compare and contrast the Christological methodologies of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. How did their different approaches lead to significantly different understandings of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith?
2. Analyze Wolfhart Pannenberg's "Christology from below." What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach, and to what extent does it succeed in affirming traditional Christological doctrines?
3. Discuss the significance of the Chalcedonian Definition for Karl Barth's Christology. How did he understand and defend the pronouncements of this ecumenical council in the context of modern theological challenges?
4. Evaluate the impact of existentialist philosophy on Rudolf Bultmann's theology, particularly his program of demythologizing. What are the potential benefits and dangers of interpreting biblical texts through an existentialist lens?
5. Considering the views of Barth, Bultmann, and Pannenberg, what are some of the key challenges and opportunities for contemporary Christology in engaging with modern thought while remaining faithful to the core tenets of Christian belief?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Christology:** The branch of Christian theology that studies the nature, person, and work of Jesus Christ.
- **Liberal Theology:** A theological movement that arose in the 19th century, emphasizing reason and experience over traditional dogma, often downplaying the supernatural elements of Scripture.
- **Orthodox Christology:** The traditional understanding of Jesus Christ, particularly as defined by the early ecumenical councils (e.g., Nicea and Chalcedon), emphasizing his full divinity and full humanity united in one person.
- **Universalism:** The theological belief that all people will ultimately be saved.
- **Christomonism:** The tendency to overemphasize the role and person of Christ to the detriment or neglect of other aspects of Christian theology (e.g., the Father, the Holy Spirit, creation).
- **Natural Revelation/Natural Theology:** The idea that knowledge of God can be obtained through reason and observation of the natural world, apart from specific divine revelation.
- **Chalcedon:** The fourth ecumenical council of the Christian Church, held in 451 AD, which formulated a key definition of Christ's person as having two natures (divine and human) united in one hypostasis (person), without confusion, change, division, or separation.
- **Impersonal Human Nature of Christ:** The theological concept that Christ's human nature, in the incarnation, was not a separate human person existing independently but was assumed by the divine Logos (the Son of God).
- **Virgin Birth:** The doctrine that Jesus Christ was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary through the Holy Spirit, without a human father.
- **Trinity (Economic):** The doctrine of the Trinity as manifested in God's actions in the world, particularly in creation, redemption, and sanctification (e.g., Father as Creator, Son as Redeemer, Holy Spirit as Sanctifier).
- **Trinity (Ontological/Imminent):** The doctrine of the Trinity as describing God's eternal being and inner relationships as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- **Patipassianism:** A heretical theological view suggesting that God the Father himself suffered on the cross in the person of Jesus Christ.

- **Christology from Below:** A Christological approach that begins with the humanity of Jesus, his historical life and actions, and moves towards understanding his divinity.
- **Christology from Above:** A Christological approach that begins with the pre-existent divinity of the Son of God and moves towards understanding his incarnation and humanity.
- **Form Criticism:** A method of biblical criticism that analyzes the literary genres (forms) of the biblical texts and seeks to understand their original setting and purpose in the early Christian communities.
- **Demythologizing:** Rudolf Bultmann's program of reinterpreting the mythological elements of the New Testament in existential terms to uncover their underlying meaning for human existence.
- **Existentialism:** A philosophical movement emphasizing individual existence, freedom, and choice, often focusing on the human search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world.
- **Kerygma:** The core message or proclamation of the Christian gospel, particularly as preached by the apostles.
- **Proleptic:** Anticipatory; referring to something that exists or occurs before its normal or proper time.
- **Eschatological:** Relating to the "last things" or the end times, including the resurrection, final judgment, and the ultimate destiny of humanity and the cosmos.
- **Enhypostasis:** A theological term often used to describe how Christ's human nature exists "in" his divine person (hypostasis). Pannenberg used a variation of this concept in his later thought regarding humanity.

5. FAQs on Peterson, Salvation, Salvation, Session 7, Modern Christology, Part 2, Barth, Bultmann, Pannenberg, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions on Modern Christology (Barth, Bultmann, Pannenberg)

1. How did Karl Barth's approach to Christology differ from the liberal theology he encountered? Barth reacted strongly against the liberal theology of the 19th century, which he felt had failed him in his pastoral work. Instead of downplaying traditional doctrines, Barth affirmed the classical orthodox statements on the person of Christ from the first five centuries. He centered his entire theological framework on Christ, viewing Jesus Christ as the very Word of God and the key to understanding all of God's ways and works.

2. What is "Christological concentration" in Barth's theology, and why was it so important to him? Christological concentration, for Barth, meant that the whole range of systematic theology must be fundamentally determined and understood through the lens of Jesus Christ. He believed that the revealed Word of God is identical with Jesus Christ, and therefore, any true church dogmatics must have Christology at its core. He saw Jesus Christ as the beginning of all God's actions and the standard by which all else is judged.

3. What were some of the main criticisms or concerns raised regarding Karl Barth's theology, despite its positive contributions? Several concerns have been raised about Barth's theology. One is his view on the doctrine of Scripture, as he did not affirm inerrancy. Another significant issue is the perceived tendency towards universalism in his understanding of election, suggesting that Jesus was the elect and reprobate for all, which many argue contradicts the traditional interpretation of Ephesians 1. Additionally, Barth has been accused of "Christomonism" for his intense focus on Christ, potentially at the expense of other theological aspects, and his denial of natural revelation in creation is seen as problematic.

4. What was Rudolf Bultmann's "program of demythologizing," and what were his motivations behind it?

Bultmann believed that the New Testament is full of "mythology"—a three-tiered worldview with divine interventions, miracles, and a literal heaven and hell—which is no longer acceptable to modern people. His program of demythologizing aimed to reinterpret these mythological elements into anthropological and existential categories to uncover the underlying message about human existence and the possibility of authentic self-understanding through the cross of Christ. He sought to make the Christian message relevant by stripping away what he considered outdated and unbelievable cosmological views.

5. How did Bultmann's view of Jesus and the New Testament differ from Barth's?

Bultmann approached the New Testament from a radically critical perspective, utilizing form criticism and viewing the texts as products of early Christian community theology rather than straightforward historical accounts. He denied many traditional Christian doctrines, including the literal incarnation, deity of Christ, miracles, resurrection, and second coming. In contrast, Barth affirmed these classical doctrines, albeit with his own unique interpretations. For Bultmann, the focus was on the existential meaning of the cross for the individual, while Barth centered on the objective reality of Christ as God incarnate.

6. What was Wolfhart Pannenberg's concept of "Christology from below," and why did he advocate for this approach?

Pannenberg argued for a "Christology from below," starting with the historical Jesus of Nazareth and working upwards to his divinity. He believed this approach was necessary to communicate effectively with modern people who might find a "Christology from above" (starting with Jesus' divinity) less accessible. By examining the historical evidence, particularly Jesus' claims, his fate, and the resurrection, Pannenberg aimed to demonstrate Jesus' divinity as the culmination of his earthly life and vindication by God.

7. How did Pannenberg's "Christology from below" ultimately lead him to affirm traditional doctrines like the incarnation and the Trinity?

Despite starting with the historical Jesus, Pannenberg believed that the evidence, especially the resurrection, pointed to Jesus' unique relationship with God. He argued that Jesus' claim to speak with God's authority and his subsequent resurrection by God served as a proleptic anticipation of the end of history and revealed Jesus to be one with God. This led him to affirm the incarnation as the point where God entered human history in the person of Jesus and to understand the Trinity as being revealed through Jesus' relationship with the Father and the work of the Spirit.

8. What were some of the criticisms or concerns raised about Pannenberg's "Christology from below"? While Pannenberg's approach was seen as valuable for engaging with modern thought and taking the historicity of Jesus seriously, it also faced criticisms. One concern was his critical attitude towards certain biblical accounts, such as the virgin birth and Jesus' self-consciousness as the Messiah, which he sometimes dismissed as legendary to fit his "from below" methodology. Additionally, his concept of an "eschatological enhypostasis of all men" raised concerns about a potential slide towards universalism and the deification of humanity, a point on which the lecturer explicitly disagreed.