

Dr. Roger Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 20, Twentieth Century, Karl Barth Resources from NotebookLM

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

1. Abstract of Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 20, Twentieth Century, Karl Barth, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture by Dr. Roger Green introduces **Karl Barth**, a significant 20th-century Protestant theologian who sought to counter **Protestant liberalism**. Barth emphasized the **transcendence of God** and the **sinfulness of humanity**, asserting a **discontinuity** between them that could only be bridged by **Jesus Christ**, whom Barth considered the central revelation of God. For Barth, the **Bible** is both fully human and divine, its primary purpose being to bear witness to Christ, making **preaching** central to the church's mission. Regarding **government**, Barth believed it was divinely appointed for justice and peace but cautioned against the church aligning with any inherently sinful political system, as exemplified by the **Barmen Declaration's** resistance to Nazi ideology.

**2. 14 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of
Dr. Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 20 – Double
click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the
Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link
there (Church History → Reformation to the Present).**



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3. Briefing Document: Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 20, Twentieth Century, Karl Barth

Briefing Document: The Theology of Karl Barth

Overview: This lecture by Dr. Roger Green introduces the core theological tenets of Karl Barth, a pivotal figure in 20th-century Protestantism. Dr. Green frames Barth's theology as a reaction against Protestant liberalism, emphasizing a return to Reformation principles while addressing the specific challenges of the modern era, exemplified by the Nazi regime and the Barmen Declaration. The lecture covers Barth's views on the transcendence of God, the sinfulness of humanity, the central role of Jesus Christ, the nature of Scripture, and the relationship between church and state.

Main Themes and Important Ideas/Facts:

1. Background and Critique of Protestant Liberalism:

- Barth fundamentally believed that **"Protestant liberalism was fundamentally flawed"** and **"fundamentally erroneous."**
- His theological shift was partly due to the experience of World War I and his deeper engagement with the Bible.
- Barth argued that Protestant theology had **"accommodated itself to the broader culture,"** particularly in two key areas:
- A **"positive attitude... toward science, toward culture, toward art, a positive attitude toward kind of natural theology."** Barth criticized this lack of theological judgment on secular culture.
- A **"Protestant liberal emphasis upon feeling... mysticism or religious feelings, stress on feelings, this kind of experiential religion that Schleiermacher has led us into."** Barth believed this focus on subjective experience was not grounded in biblical truth.
- Barth sought to **"bring theology back to Reformation theology,"** particularly the insights of Luther and Calvin, whom he considered the **"best interpreters of the Bible."**
- The movement associated with Barth is sometimes called **"Neo-Orthodoxy"** or the **"New Orthodoxy,"** referring to a 20th-century articulation of Reformation orthodoxy.

- Dr. Green emphasizes that it is inaccurate to label Barth as liberal, as his entire theological project was a **"battle[d] against... classical Protestant liberalism."**

2. The Transcendence of God:

- Barth rejected the liberal emphasis on **"continuity between God and us,"** arguing instead for a fundamental **"discontinuity."**
- He asserted that **"God is wholly other,"** both in terms of holiness (H-O-L-Y) and in being entirely different (W-H-O-L-L-Y).
- For Barth, the idea of a casual relationship with God ("God as my good buddy, my good friend, it's Jesus and me kind of stuff") was unacceptable.
- He believed that humanity cannot **"work their way up to this transcendent God"** through feelings, experience, or knowledge.
- Instead, the proper posture before God is one of **"sinfulness, helplessness, and weakness,"** allowing God to **"break through to your life."**
- Barth viewed God as a **"subject, not an object."** God is the one who speaks and addresses humanity, not an entity to be grasped by human understanding.
- Regarding culture, Barth saw God not as a **"patron saint of culture"** but as the **"judge of all cultures,"** as all stand in some form of disobedience.

3. Sin, the Sin of Man:

- Echoing Reinhold Niebuhr, Barth believed that since the fall, **"humankind has been under the dominion of sin."**
- Sin has so permeated humanity that **"even our natural capacities are still under the dominion of sin,"** though not entirely eliminated but severely hindered and perverted.
- Sin has created a fundamental division: **"It's a line in the sand: God is on one side, and we are on the other side."**
- Due to this sinfulness, **"all attempts to find God are now impossible for him, for Barth,"** including relying on feelings, emotions, the law, morality, or reason.
- This impossibility extends to **"our cultural achievements"** and **"natural theology."** Barth questioned the validity of deducing God's nature from the natural world, pointing to the problem of evil and suffering.

- Barth's emphasis on sin as rebellion against God presents a "**counter-cultural message**" in a world that often denies or minimizes human sinfulness.

4. Jesus Christ:

- Given the discontinuity between God and humanity and human inability to reach God, "**God has decided to break through in our lives. The one true revelation of God is Jesus.**"
- Barth considered **John 1:1-18**, particularly **verse 14** ("**The Word became flesh and dwelt among us**"), as central. He called John 1:14 "**theology in a nutshell.**"
- For Barth, the "**central doctrine of the Christian church is the doctrine of the incarnation.**" Everything else flows from God becoming flesh in Jesus.
- In Jesus, we see the "**grace of God in Christ**" fully and completely, saving us from our sinfulness. Barth described this as the "**triumph of grace,**" where "**God's yes is stronger than our no.**"
- While believers still live as sinners, they do so "**standing under God's justification,**" similar to Luther's understanding.
- Human response should be "**utterly dependent on the grace of God,**" not on works, good deeds, experience, or feelings.
- Barth's strong emphasis on God's grace led to the question of universalism. While he didn't definitively state it, he "**certainly leaned in that direction,**" believing God's grace would ultimately overcome sin.
- Regarding Christology, Barth considered **Philippians 2:5-11** as the greatest passage. He interpreted verses 5-8 as "**the Lord becoming our servant**" through his humiliation and death, and verses 9-11 as "**the servant becoming our Lord**" through his exaltation. He emphasized the inseparable nature of Jesus' full divinity and full humanity.

5. Scripture, the Bible:

- Barth viewed the Bible analogously to Christology, arguing that the written word is "**fully human and fully divine at the same time.**"
- It is a word from God, but also a product of human authors and historical context.
- Barth's understanding of the Bible flowed from his doctrine of Christ, not the other way around. The "**basic job of the Bible... is to bear witness to Christ.**"

- He positioned his view between liberalism, which downplayed the Bible's divine authority, and fundamentalism, which he believed held a view of Scripture that was **"higher than their view of Jesus"** by emphasizing its sole divinity.
- Two key implications of Barth's view of Scripture are:
- The **"importance of preaching and the importance of proclamation"** of the gospel as the central task of the church.
- His understanding of **revelation**. True revelation does not come through merely studying the Bible with human reason but **"when we let the Bible study us"** and become **"listeners of the Bible."** Research and study are important but secondary to listening to what God is saying through Scripture.

6. The Government:

- Barth believed that **"God establishes the church, of course, but God also establishes governments."**
- However, **"Christianity can never be mixed with any form of government,"** and no form of government is inherently more Christian than another.
- All governments are **"by nature, bound to human sin"** because they are run by sinful humans.
- The church (capital C) should be careful not to connect itself with any government, as it would be aligning with a sinful institution.
- Barth's criticism of the Nazi government, and Bonhoeffer's involvement in the plot against Hitler, stemmed from the conviction that the Nazi regime had so fundamentally violated God's ordained purpose for government (to provide **"for justice and peace"**) that it could no longer be considered a legitimate government. It had become **"in rebellion against God."**
- The Barmen Declaration affirmed that **"Jesus Christ is the only word of God that we are to hear, trust, and obey,"** standing against the totalitarian claims of the Nazi state.

Conclusion:

Dr. Green's lecture provides a comprehensive introduction to the foundational elements of Karl Barth's influential theology. Barth's work represents a significant departure from liberal Protestantism, emphasizing the radical transcendence of God, the depth of human sinfulness, the centrality of Jesus Christ as God's self-revelation, a nuanced understanding of Scripture, and a critical perspective on the relationship between church and state. His ideas, particularly as articulated in the Barmen Declaration, had a profound impact on Christian thought and action in the 20th century and continue to be relevant today.

4. Study Guide: Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 20, Twentieth Century, Karl Barth

Study Guide: 20th Century Protestantism - Karl Barth

Key Concepts and Themes:

- **Critique of Protestant Liberalism:** Understand Barth's fundamental disagreement with liberal theology's emphasis on human experience, continuity between God and humanity, and accommodation to culture.
- **Transcendence of God:** Grasp Barth's insistence on God's "wholly otherness," the radical discontinuity between God and humanity, and God as Subject rather than object.
- **Sin and Human Incapacity:** Recognize Barth's view of humanity's total dominion under sin since the Fall, rendering us incapable of reaching God through our own efforts, including reason, feeling, or natural theology.
- **Jesus Christ as Revelation:** Comprehend Barth's central focus on Jesus Christ as the unique and complete revelation of God, the overcoming of the God-human divide through the Incarnation. Understand the significance of John 1:14 and Philippians 2:5-11.
- **The Triumph of Grace:** Understand Barth's belief in the power of God's grace to break through human sinfulness, with God's "yes" being stronger than humanity's "no."
- **Analogical View of Scripture:** Understand Barth's analogy between the Incarnation and Scripture, viewing the Bible as fully human and fully divine, its primary purpose being to bear witness to Christ.
- **Importance of Preaching and Proclamation:** Recognize the central role of the church in proclaiming the Gospel based on the authority of Scripture.
- **Revelation as Encounter:** Understand Barth's view of revelation not as intellectual understanding but as a personal encounter that occurs when the Bible "studies us" and we become "listeners."
- **Church and State:** Grasp Barth's understanding of God as the author of both church and state, their distinct roles, and the danger of the church aligning with any particular, inherently sinful, form of government. Understand the basis for criticizing unjust regimes like Nazi Germany.

- **Barmen Declaration:** Understand the historical context and central tenets of the Barmen Declaration as a confession of faith against the Nazi-fied church, emphasizing Christ as the sole Word of God.

Quiz:

1. What was Karl Barth's primary criticism of Protestant liberalism? What were the two main areas of accommodation he specifically challenged?
2. Explain Barth's concept of the "transcendence of God." How did this differ from the view prevalent in Protestant liberalism?
3. According to Barth, what is the state of humanity after the Fall? How does this impact our ability to know or reach God on our own?
4. What is the central tenet of Christian theology according to Karl Barth, and what biblical verse is foundational to this belief?
5. Explain Barth's concept of the "triumph of grace." What does he mean by saying "God's yes is stronger than our no"?
6. Describe Barth's analogical view of Scripture. How does this position differ from both liberal and fundamentalist views of the Bible?
7. What is the primary purpose of Scripture according to Barth? What are the two important practices that stem from his view of Scripture?
8. Explain Barth's understanding of divine revelation. When does true revelation occur, according to him?
9. How does Barth understand the relationship between the church and the state? Why did he and others in the Confessing Church criticize the Nazi regime despite his general view on church and state?
10. What was the purpose of the Barmen Declaration? What is one of its key declarations regarding the Word of God?

Answer Key:

1. Barth criticized Protestant liberalism for its fundamental flaws, particularly its accommodation to broader culture and its emphasis on human feeling and experience. He challenged its positive attitude towards science, culture, and natural theology, as well as its stress on religious feelings and experiential religion.

2. Barth believed in the radical "wholly otherness" of God, emphasizing a fundamental discontinuity between the divine and the human. This contrasted with Protestant liberalism's emphasis on continuity and the idea that humans could work their way up to God.
3. Barth believed that since the Fall, humanity has been under the dominion of sin, severely hindering and perverting even our natural capacities. This sinfulness creates a radical separation from God, making it impossible for us to reach God through our own efforts.
4. According to Barth, the central tenet of Christian theology is the doctrine of the Incarnation, the Word becoming flesh in Jesus Christ. The foundational biblical verse for this belief is John 1:14: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us."
5. The "triumph of grace" refers to Barth's conviction that God's grace is more powerful than human sinfulness and will ultimately prevail. Saying "God's yes is stronger than our no" emphasizes God's initiative and power in overcoming human resistance and sin.
6. Barth viewed Scripture analogously to the Incarnation, considering it fully human and fully divine simultaneously. This differed from liberalism, which saw the Bible as primarily a human book, and fundamentalism, which emphasized its sole divinity, arguably above the divinity of Christ.
7. The primary purpose of Scripture for Barth is to bear witness to Jesus Christ. Two important practices stemming from this view are the centrality of preaching the Gospel and the importance of the proclamation of the Word in the church.
8. Barth understood divine revelation not as the product of human study and reason, but as a personal encounter initiated by God when we allow the Bible to "study us" and become "listeners" to its message, rather than merely researchers.
9. Barth saw God as the author of both the church and the state, each with distinct responsibilities. He believed all governments are susceptible to sin, making church alignment dangerous. He criticized Nazi Germany because it ceased to fulfill God's purpose for government (justice and peace) and became a force of radical injustice.
10. The Barmen Declaration was a declaration by the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany to affirm its faith against the Nazi-fied church and state. A key declaration was that Jesus Christ is the only Word of God that Christians are to hear, trust, and obey.

Essay Format Questions:

1. Analyze Karl Barth's critique of Protestant liberalism. What were his main theological concerns, and how did he attempt to redirect Protestant theology?
2. Discuss the significance of the doctrine of the Incarnation in Karl Barth's theology. How does his understanding of Jesus Christ shape his views on God, humanity, and salvation?
3. Explain Karl Barth's view of Scripture as both fully human and fully divine. What are the implications of this understanding for how the Bible should be read and understood?
4. Explore Karl Barth's understanding of the relationship between the church and the state. How did his theological framework inform the Confessing Church's response to Nazi Germany?
5. Evaluate the enduring relevance of Karl Barth's theology for contemporary Protestantism. What aspects of his thought remain influential, and what criticisms have been raised against his work?

Glossary of Key Terms:

- **Accommodation (in theology):** The idea that religious beliefs or practices should be adapted to fit the prevailing culture or intellectual climate. Barth strongly opposed this.
- **Barmen Declaration (1934):** A statement of faith issued by the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany, rejecting the influence of Nazism on church doctrine and affirming the Lordship of Jesus Christ.
- **Confessing Church:** A movement within German Protestantism during the Nazi era that resisted the attempts of the Nazi regime to control and Nazify the church. Karl Barth was a key figure in this movement.
- **Continuity (in theology):** The idea of a fundamental connection or similarity between God and humanity, often emphasized in liberal theology. Barth argued for discontinuity.
- **Discontinuity (in theology):** The idea of a radical difference and separation between God and humanity, a central tenet of Barth's theology.

- **Fundamentalism:** A conservative Protestant movement that emphasizes the literal interpretation and absolute authority of the Bible. Barth critiqued its view of Scripture as solely divine.
- **Imminence of God:** The belief that God is actively present in and involved with the world and humanity. While acknowledging God's presence through Christ, Barth emphasized God's transcendence over imminence.
- **Incarnation:** The Christian doctrine that God became human in the person of Jesus Christ. This was central to Barth's theology.
- **Liberal Theology:** A theological approach that emerged in the 19th century, emphasizing reason, experience, and the immanence of God, often accommodating to modern culture and science. Barth was a staunch critic of this movement.
- **Natural Theology:** The attempt to gain knowledge of God through reason and observation of the natural world, independent of special revelation. Barth was highly critical of its ability to truly know God.
- **Neo-Orthodoxy (or New Orthodoxy):** A theological movement in the 20th century, largely initiated by Karl Barth, that sought to recover Reformation theology and emphasize the transcendence of God in response to liberal theology.
- **Proclamation:** The act of publicly and authoritatively declaring the Christian message, particularly the Gospel. This held a central place in Barth's understanding of the church's mission.
- **Reformation Theology:** The theological doctrines and principles that emerged during the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, particularly associated with figures like Martin Luther and John Calvin. Barth sought to return to its core insights.
- **Revelation:** God's self-disclosure to humanity. Barth emphasized that the primary and definitive revelation of God is Jesus Christ, witnessed to by Scripture.
- **Transcendence of God:** The theological doctrine that God is utterly beyond and distinct from the created world, surpassing human understanding and experience. This was a foundational concept in Barth's thought.

5. FAQs Green, Reformation to the Present, Session 20, Twentieth Century, Karl Barth, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions: The Theology of Karl Barth

1. What was Karl Barth's primary theological concern in the 20th century?

Barth's primary theological concern was to challenge what he saw as the fundamental flaws of Protestant liberalism, which he believed had accommodated itself too readily to broader cultural trends and emphasized human feeling and experience over the authority of God's Word. He aimed to redirect theology back to the core principles of the Reformation, emphasizing the transcendence of God and the centrality of Jesus Christ.

2. How did Karl Barth view the nature of God in contrast to Protestant liberalism?

Barth strongly emphasized the transcendence of God, asserting a radical discontinuity between God and humanity. Unlike Protestant liberalism, which stressed a continuity and the idea that humans could work their way up to God, Barth argued that God is "wholly other" (both holy and entirely different). He believed that humans stand before God in sinfulness, helplessness, and weakness, and that God is not an object to be grasped but a subject who speaks and reveals Himself. Furthermore, Barth saw God not as the patron saint of culture, but as the judge of all cultures.

3. According to Barth, what is the consequence of sin for humanity's relationship with God?

Barth believed that since the fall, humanity has been under the dominion of sin, which has severely hindered and perverted even our natural capacities. Sin has created a fundamental division between humanity and God, making it impossible for humans to reach God through their own efforts, whether through feelings, reason, moral actions, or cultural achievements. He also rejected natural theology as a valid means of understanding God, arguing that one cannot deduce the true nature of God from the created world, especially in the face of suffering and evil.

4. What is the central point of revelation and the core doctrine of the Christian faith for Barth?

For Barth, the one true revelation and disclosure of God is Jesus Christ. He considered John 1:14, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," to be "theology in a nutshell" and the central message of the Bible. Consequently, the doctrine of the incarnation – God becoming flesh in Jesus Christ – is the central doctrine of the Christian faith. Barth believed that everything else in Christian theology flows from this truth.

5. How did Barth understand the role and nature of Scripture (the Bible)?

Barth viewed the Bible analogously to Christ, as both fully human and fully divine. He argued that its primary purpose is to bear witness to Jesus Christ. Barth positioned his view between liberalism, which he felt diminished the Bible's authority, and fundamentalism, which he believed held a view of Scripture that ironically surpassed its view of Jesus. For Barth, the true revelation of God through Scripture occurs not through human research and rational understanding alone, but when individuals become "listeners" of the Bible, allowing it to study them. This perspective underscored the importance of preaching and the proclamation of the gospel.

6. What was the significance of the Barmen Declaration, and what does it reveal about Barth's views on church and state?

The Barmen Declaration (1934), which Barth helped to shape, was a confession of faith by the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany. It drew a clear line between allegiance to the gospel and accommodation to a Nazi-fied church. Section five of the declaration acknowledges the state's divine appointment to provide for justice and peace but rejects the false doctrine that the state could become a totalitarian order fulfilling the church's vocation, or that the church could become an organ of the state. This highlights Barth's belief in the distinct roles of church and state, with the crucial caveat that when a government fundamentally fails in its divinely appointed task (as Nazi Germany did), the church has a responsibility to critique it based on the ultimate authority of Jesus Christ.

7. How did Barth's theology address the relationship between God's grace and human sinfulness?

Barth powerfully emphasized the triumph of God's grace over human sin. He believed that God's grace, fully revealed in Jesus Christ, is stronger than human sinfulness and rebellion. He famously stated that "God's yes is stronger than our no." While Barth leaned towards the idea that God's grace would ultimately redeem all of creation (universalism with a "small u"), he did not definitively assert this. He affirmed, in line with Luther, that believers live as sinners even while justified by God's grace, utterly dependent on God's mercy rather than their own works or feelings.

8. What was Barth's understanding of Jesus Christ's nature, and what biblical passages were central to his Christology?

Barth firmly believed that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human simultaneously, and that these two natures are inseparable. A central passage for his Christology was Philippians 2:5-11, which he interpreted as illustrating the Lord becoming our servant (verses 5-8) and the servant becoming our Lord (verses 9-11). He considered this passage to be the greatest Christological text in the Bible, demonstrating the inseparable unity of Christ's divine and human natures.