

Dr. Roger Green, American Christianity, Session 21, Neo-Orthodoxy and Social Crisis Resources from NotebookLM

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

1. Abstract of Green, American Christianity, Session 21, Neo-Orthodoxy and Social Crisis, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This excerpt from Dr. Roger Green's lecture series on American Christianity introduces **Neo-Orthodoxy** as a 20th-century Protestant movement that sought a middle ground between fundamentalism and liberalism by centering on scripture interpreted through Reformation theology, particularly Calvin. The lecture highlights the movement's engagement with social issues, its acknowledgment of human sinfulness and the limitations of nations, and its emphasis on confronting political realities. A significant portion of the lecture then focuses on the foundational influence of **Karl Barth**, detailing his life, his rejection of liberal theology due to his experiences in World War I, and the core tenets of his theology, including a renewed emphasis on the Bible as the Word of God, the sovereignty of God, God's grace revealed in Christ, the sinfulness of humanity, and a God who actively reveals Himself.

2. 26 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Green, American Christianity, Session 21 – 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 → American Christianity).



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3. Briefing Document: Green, Session 21, Neo-Orthodoxy and Social Crisis

Briefing Document: Neo-Orthodoxy and Social Crisis

Overview: This lecture by Dr. Roger Green introduces the theological movement of Neo-Orthodoxy, which emerged in the 20th century as a response to the division between fundamentalism and a "bankrupt" liberalism within American Christianity. The lecture emphasizes the movement's intellectual strength, its engagement with political realities, and the foundational influence of Swiss theologian Karl Barth.

Main Themes and Important Ideas:

1. Background of Neo-Orthodoxy:

- **Context:** Arising in the 1930s-1960s, Neo-Orthodoxy sought to provide a "very healthy Protestantism" amidst the polarization of American Christianity between fundamentalism and liberalism.
- **Definition:** The term "Neo-Orthodoxy" signifies a "new orthodoxy centered on the scripture and interpreted largely through the reformers and especially through Calvin." It represents a 20th-century revival of scriptural orthodoxy rooted in the Reformation.
- **Intellectual Engagement:** Unlike some forms of fundamentalism, Neo-Orthodoxy was a "very, very strong intellectual movement" that could engage with the modern world:
 - It allowed for scientific inquiry without conflict with religion.
 - It accepted biblical criticism (within certain limits) without undermining the Bible's authority.
 - It accommodated urban life and its development.
 - Crucially, it permitted and practiced "a critique of the economic and social structures in America," arguing that such critique was not incompatible with biblical Christianity.
- **Political Engagement:** Neo-Orthodox thinkers were "very astute in understanding biblical theology and interrelating biblical theology to the political realities of the world in which they found themselves." They believed biblical understanding should inform their understanding of the political world.

2. Political Realities Faced by Neo-Orthodoxy:

- **The Sinfulness of the World:** Neo-Orthodoxy had a strong emphasis on the pervasive nature of sin, highlighted by the stark realities of the 20th century, including World War I, the Holocaust, and World War II.
- Reinhold Niebuhr is quoted: "**Original sin is the most empirical of all doctrines.**" Dr. Green explains this means the reality of sin is evident and observable in the world.
- Neo-Orthodox thinkers contrasted their emphasis on sin with the perceived optimism of liberal theology.
- **The Limitations of All Nations:** Neo-Orthodoxy recognized that "all nations have limitations, and certainly, all nations have limitations in their virtue." They acknowledged that nations, including America, could act in ways contradictory to their own well-being and that of others.
- They believed God's precise dealing with a nation was unique to Israel in the Old Testament.
- In the present era, they emphasized the universal Church ("the body of Christ") as the primary entity associated with God, cautioning against equating God with any single nation. **"Be careful of associating God with any single nation now. That happened with Israel, but it hasn't happened since. Now you associate God with his body, with the body of Christ here on earth, capital C, the church, and that is universal. That's in all nations. That's transnational."**
- **The Actualities of Political Power:** Neo-Orthodoxy stressed the importance of confronting and analyzing political power, assessing whether it was fulfilling its legitimate purpose.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer's involvement in the plot to assassinate Hitler is presented as a prime example of this principle. Bonhoeffer believed that Nazism had "overstepped the boundaries that God establishes when he establishes nations and when he establishes power" and had become an illegitimate political force.
- Neo-Orthodox thinkers opposed Christian groups that ignored or were blind to the political realities and injustices of their time.
- **Neo-Orthodoxy as an Intellectual Tradition:** This movement fostered a "great intellectual tradition within American Protestantism," emphasizing the

importance of "worshiping God with your mind" and using intellect to understand and minister to the world.

- This stood in contrast to some strands of American Fundamentalism perceived as "anti-intellectual."

3. The Importance of Karl Barth:

- **Foundational Influence:** Understanding Karl Barth's life and theology is crucial to grasping Neo-Orthodoxy.
- **Life and Context:** Born in Switzerland and raised in a liberal Protestant tradition.
- His experience as a pastor during World War I led him to reject the "bankrupt" nature of classical Protestant liberalism.
- He turned to the Bible and the writings of reformers like Luther and especially Calvin, as well as Kierkegaard, to find a new theological foundation.
- His commentary on the Book of Romans became a surprising "blockbuster," marking his emergence as a significant theological voice.
- He taught at various German universities and later at Basel in Switzerland.
- His Swiss citizenship protected him from the fate of figures like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who opposed the Nazi regime.
- He authored the **Barman Declaration**, a confession of faith against the Nazified German church.
- His magnum opus, *Church Dogmatics*, was a multi-volume systematic theology that he continued writing until his death.
- He is often referred to as the "second Augustine" due to his profound impact.
- **Theologian as a Public Figure:** Karl Barth was a recognized "public theologian," whose ideas had a significant impact on his culture, a phenomenon Dr. Green suggests is less common in contemporary American life. His appearance on the cover of *Time Magazine* highlights this influence.

4. Key Aspects of Karl Barth's Theology Influencing Neo-Orthodoxy:

- **Seriousness about the Bible as the Word of God:** Barth emphasized the Bible as God's Word, primarily speaking about Christ as the Word of God. He challenged attempts to "accommodate," "control," or "tame" the Word.

- He critiqued scholars who treated the Bible merely as mysteries to be solved.
- He opposed liberal Protestants who reduced Jesus to a "tame middle-class person" and used the Bible to justify their own ideologies.
- He challenged social gospelers who made the Bible solely an ethical text focused on social reform, neglecting its broader message about God and humanity.
- **Seriousness about Who God Is:** Barth underscored God's sovereignty, majesty, glory, and "otherness" (both wholly/totally other and holy other).
- He criticized liberal Protestantism for "taming God" and reducing him to a mere "good buddy" or "the man upstairs."
- **Seriousness about God's Grace and Revelation:** Barth viewed Christianity not as a "religion" (humanity's attempt to reach God), but as the "body of Christ revealed to us by God's grace."
- He believed God discloses himself through grace, with the ultimate revelation being Jesus Christ.
- He considered **John 1:14 ("The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...")** as **"theology in a nutshell,"** with the rest of the Bible serving as a commentary on this incarnational event.
- **Seriousness about Human Beings as Sinners:** Barth emphasized that humans are "first and foremost, sinners" in rebellion against a holy God.
- He echoed Calvin's idea that the knowledge of God and self begins with recognizing human sinfulness.
- He noted that this message is "counter-cultural" in a world that often avoids the topic of sin and the need for salvation.
- **Seriousness about the Attempt to Know God:** Barth argued that humans cannot grasp God through their own intellect or concepts alone.
- Knowledge of God comes only because God "addresses us," "speaks to us," "disclosed himself to us," and "given himself to us," demanding a response. This creates a "dialectical" relationship or dialogue.

Points for Further Discussion:

- The specific ways in which Neo-Orthodox theologians in America applied these theological principles to the social and political crises of their time.

- The nuances of the relationship between Neo-Orthodoxy and different strands of American evangelicalism.
- The ongoing relevance of Neo-Orthodox thought in contemporary theological and social discussions.

This briefing document provides a foundational understanding of Neo-Orthodoxy and the significant influence of Karl Barth, setting the stage for further exploration of this important movement in American Christianity.

4. Study Guide: Green, American Christianity, Session 21, Neo-Orthodoxy and Social Crisis

Neo-Orthodoxy and Social Crisis: A Study Guide

Quiz

1. Describe the historical context in America that led to the rise of Neo-Orthodoxy in the mid-20th century.
2. What does the term "Neo-Orthodoxy" signify, and what were the primary theological sources of inspiration for this movement?
3. According to the lecture, in what ways did Neo-Orthodox theologians approach the relationship between science and religion, and biblical criticism?
4. Explain Reinhold Niebuhr's assertion that "Original sin is the most empirical of all doctrines." What did he mean by "empirical" in this context?
5. How did Neo-Orthodox theologians view the relationship between God and individual nations, contrasting it with the case of Israel?
6. Discuss the Neo-Orthodox perspective on engaging with political power, referencing the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
7. What was Karl Barth's initial theological background, and what significant event led to a major shift in his theological perspective?
8. Identify and briefly explain two key aspects of Karl Barth's theology that significantly influenced the Neo-Orthodox movement in America.
9. According to Barth, what is the fundamental difference between "religion" and Christianity, and why did he prefer the latter?
10. What is the significance of John 1:14 in Karl Barth's theology, and how did he summarize its importance for understanding the Bible?

Quiz Answer Key

1. In the mid-20th century, America was theologically divided between fundamentalism on the right and a seemingly bankrupt liberalism on the left. Christians felt the need for a robust Protestantism that could address the challenges of the era.

2. "Neo-Orthodoxy" means a new orthodoxy, centered on scripture but interpreted through the lens of the Reformation, particularly the theology of John Calvin. It represented a 20th-century revival of scriptural orthodoxy.
3. Neo-Orthodox theologians generally allowed for the findings of the scientific world and accepted biblical criticism to a certain extent, believing neither necessarily undermined the truth of the Bible or the importance of faith.
4. Niebuhr meant that the reality of sin, particularly in its most profound and destructive forms like the World Wars and the Holocaust, was evident and observable ("empirical") without the need for abstract theological arguments.
5. Neo-Orthodox theologians believed that God dealt uniquely with the nation of Israel in the past. However, in the present era, God's primary relationship is with the universal Church, the body of Christ, not with any specific nation.
6. Neo-Orthodox thinkers believed Christians must critically engage with political realities and challenge injustices. Bonhoeffer's involvement in the plot against Hitler exemplified this when political power overstepped its divinely ordained boundaries.
7. Karl Barth was initially raised in a liberal Protestant tradition. His experience as a pastor during World War I revealed to him the inadequacy and "bankruptcy" of this liberal theology in the face of real-world suffering and sin.
8. Two key aspects of Barth's theology are a renewed seriousness about the Bible as the Word of God (with Christ as the central Word) and a strong emphasis on the transcendence and "wholly otherness" of God.
9. Barth viewed "religion" as humanity's attempt to reach God through pious actions, while he understood Christianity as God's gracious self-revelation in Jesus Christ, forming the community of believers.
10. Barth considered John 1:14 ("The Word became flesh") to be "theology in a nutshell," representing the incarnation of God in Christ. He believed the entire Bible serves as a commentary on this central event of God's self-disclosure and grace.

Essay Format Questions

1. Analyze the key characteristics of Neo-Orthodoxy as a theological movement, explaining how it sought to navigate the theological landscape of its time while addressing the social and political crises of the 20th century.
2. Discuss the significance of Karl Barth's life and theological contributions to the development of Neo-Orthodoxy. How did his experiences and core theological ideas shape this influential movement?
3. Explore the Neo-Orthodox understanding of sin and human nature in light of the major events of the 20th century. How did this perspective differ from both liberal Protestantism and fundamentalism?
4. Evaluate the Neo-Orthodox approach to the relationship between faith and the socio-political realm. Using specific examples from the lecture, discuss the strengths and potential weaknesses of their engagement with political power and social structures.
5. Compare and contrast the theological influences on Neo-Orthodoxy, such as the Reformation (especially Calvin), Kierkegaard, and the critique of liberal Protestantism. How did these diverse sources contribute to the unique identity of this movement?

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Neo-Orthodoxy:** A 20th-century Protestant theological movement that emphasized the transcendence of God, the sinfulness of humanity, and the Bible as the Word of God, often drawing inspiration from Reformation theologians.
- **Fundamentalism:** A conservative Protestant movement that arose in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in reaction to modernism and liberal theology, emphasizing the literal interpretation of the Bible and its inerrancy.
- **Liberal Protestantism:** A theological approach that emerged in the 19th century, emphasizing reason, experience, and the immanence of God, often seeking to harmonize Christianity with modern science and culture.
- **Empirical:** Based on observation or experience rather than theory or logic. In the context of Niebuhr, it refers to the visible and tangible evidence of sin in the world.
- **Original Sin:** The Christian doctrine that humanity inherited a tendency towards sinfulness as a result of the first sin committed by Adam and Eve.
- **Social Gospel:** A Protestant intellectual movement that applied Christian ethics to social problems, advocating for social justice and reform.
- **Dogmatics:** The systematic formulation and articulation of Christian doctrines or beliefs.
- **Barmen Declaration:** A statement of faith written in 1934 by Karl Barth and others in opposition to the Nazification of the German Protestant Church, affirming the sole lordship of Jesus Christ.
- **Transcendence of God:** The theological concept that God is utterly beyond and independent of the created world, distinct from and superior to it.
- **Revelation (in theology):** God's act of disclosing or making himself and his will known to humanity, often through scripture, creation, and especially through Jesus Christ.
- **Incarnation:** The Christian doctrine that God became human in the person of Jesus Christ.
- **Universalism (in theology):** The theological belief that all people will ultimately be saved. Barth's position on this was nuanced and debated.

5. FAQs Green, American Christianity, Session 21, Neo-Orthodoxy and Social Crisis, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions on Neo-Orthodoxy and Karl Barth

1. What was the historical context that led to the emergence of Neo-Orthodoxy in American Christianity? Neo-Orthodoxy arose in America during the 1930s, 40s, 50s, and 60s as a reaction to the significant divide within Christianity between fundamentalism on the right and a liberal theology on the left that was perceived as failing. Many Christians felt the need for a robust Protestantism that was firmly rooted in scripture but could also engage with the modern world, including scientific advancements, biblical criticism (within limits), urban life, and critiques of economic and social injustices.

2. What is the core idea behind the name "Neo-Orthodoxy"? The term "Neo-Orthodoxy" signifies a "new orthodoxy" that sought to recover and re-emphasize traditional Christian doctrines, particularly those of the Reformation era and especially the theology of John Calvin. It represented a return to a scripture-centered faith but with an understanding of the 20th-century context, distinguishing it from a simple repetition of past orthodoxies.

3. How did Neo-Orthodoxy view the relationship between Christianity and the realities of the 20th century, such as war and social issues? Neo-Orthodox thinkers held a strong awareness of the "sinfulness of this world," underscored by events like World War I and the Holocaust. They emphasized the limitations and potential for evil within all nations, including America, and cautioned against equating any single nation with God's direct favor (except for historical Israel). They stressed the importance of confronting political power and critiquing it when it overstepped moral boundaries, as exemplified by Dietrich Bonhoeffer's opposition to Nazism. Furthermore, they believed that Christians should engage with and analyze economic and social structures from a biblical perspective.

4. What was the significance of Karl Barth to the Neo-Orthodox movement? Karl Barth was a pivotal figure whose theology profoundly influenced Neo-Orthodoxy. His emphasis on the Bible as the Word of God, the absolute sovereignty and "otherness" of God, the centrality of God's grace revealed in Jesus Christ, the fundamental sinfulness of humanity, and the understanding that knowledge of God comes only through God's self-disclosure and our response formed the theological backbone of the movement. Without understanding Barth, one cannot grasp the core tenets of Neo-Orthodoxy.

5. What were the key aspects of Karl Barth's theology that shaped Neo-Orthodoxy?

Barth's theology, influential to Neo-Orthodoxy, included: * A **new seriousness about the Word of God**, challenging attempts to control, tame, or reduce it to mere intellectual puzzles, middle-class ideology, or solely an ethical guide. * A **new seriousness about the nature of God** as the sovereign creator and Lord, "wholly other" (both totally and holy), contrasting with the more domesticated view of God in liberal Protestantism. * A **new seriousness about God's grace and revelation**, emphasizing that Christianity is not a human-made religion striving to reach God but rather the result of God's gracious self-disclosure in Jesus Christ (the "Word become flesh" in John 1:14). * A **new seriousness about human beings as sinners**, highlighting our inherent rebellion against a holy God and the need for redemption. * A **new seriousness in attempting to know God**, asserting that we can only know God because He initiates the relationship by addressing and revealing Himself to us, demanding a response.

6. How did Karl Barth's personal experiences influence his theological development?

Barth's upbringing in liberal Protestantism and his experience as a pastor during World War I were crucial in his theological shift. Witnessing the devastation of the war exposed the bankruptcy of the liberal theology he had been taught, leading him to turn back to the Bible and the Reformers (especially Calvin) for a more robust understanding of God, humanity, and the world.

7. What was Barth's stance against the Nazi regime in Germany, and how did his Swiss citizenship play a role?

Barth strongly opposed the Nazi regime, recognizing it as an illegitimate political power that had overstepped its divinely ordained boundaries. He was the principal author of the Barmen Declaration, a confession of faith against the Nazified German church, affirming Jesus Christ as the sole Lord. Being a Swiss citizen protected him from the fate of individuals like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was imprisoned and executed. Barth was eventually expelled from Germany but was able to return to Switzerland and continue teaching.

8. How did Neo-Orthodoxy, influenced by thinkers like Barth, differ from both fundamentalism and liberal Protestantism in its approach to faith and the world? Neo-Orthodoxy offered a middle ground between fundamentalism and liberal Protestantism. Unlike some fundamentalists, Neo-Orthodox thinkers generally accepted the findings of science and limited forms of biblical criticism and engaged with urban life and social issues. However, they shared with fundamentalism a high view of scripture and a commitment to core orthodox doctrines, which they felt liberal Protestantism had compromised by accommodating too much to modern thought and downplaying the transcendence of God and the reality of sin. Neo-Orthodoxy sought a more theocentric approach, emphasizing God's initiative and sovereignty in all things, while still engaging critically with the social and political realities of their time.