



Topic: Knowledge of God's existence

Option:

Essential Richer Reading – you must read this for your lessons

Recommended Richer Reading – advised as it would enhance your understanding further

Further Richer Reading – widening your knowledge beyond A-levels

Richer Reading title: Barth and Brunner Discuss Natural Theology

Type: Podcast: Article from website: <https://www.bravedaily.com/2015/02/06/natural-theology-brunner-barth/>

Reading intention: (*importance of the text, what students will gain from it*)

- Gives a detailed overview into the well-known academic debates between Barth and Brunner.
- Gain a further insight into the theology of Karl Barth which synoptically links with other topics in the course.
- Can see the direct responses and arguments between Natural and Revealed Theology beyond the specification.

Core content to take away:

- Brunner's arguments that support Natural Theology. His arguments can be used to support scholars such as Calvin and Aquinas
- Barth's refuting of Natural Theology in favour of Revealed Theology and the justification for this.

Exam help...

- Understanding the context of Barth will help you make more appropriate synoptic links in your essays
- Looking at arguments and responses will help you formulate sustained lines of arguments in your essays that are logically structured.

Task for this reading:

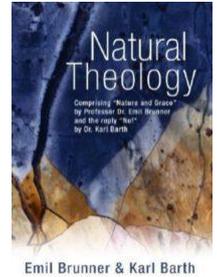
1. Work through this article paragraph by paragraph.
2. Highlight key arguments from Brunner and Barth in different colours.
3. Summarise each paragraph in 1-3 bullet points on the right hand side next to it in your own words.
4. Finally, draw up a table/notes to summarise the Barth Brunner debate in a clear and concise way.

Any quotes you want to use from Barth or Brunner, please check.



BARTH AND BRUNNER DISCUSS NATURAL THEOLOGY

Posted by [Kailynn](#) | [Book](#) |



The debate over natural theology presents the church with interesting things to think about. It is a discussion that is not unique to our generation. Theologians from centuries past have wrestled with and thought through this

issue, often arriving at different conclusions. Among these theologians are Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. During the 20th century Brunner and Barth engaged in a debate about the revelation of God and how humanity receives it. Emil Brunner argued that the human has the ability to know God outside of and prior to the saving knowledge that is found in Jesus Christ. Karl Barth, on the other hand, responded with a resounding “No!” Barth argues instead that there is no knowledge of God outside of Jesus. The essays written by these two theologians have been collected in the book [Natural Theology: Comprising “Nature and Grace” by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply “No!” by Dr. Karl Barth](#).

NATURAL THEOLOGY

At the beginning of his essay, “Nature and Grace,” Emil Brunner asserts that “all there is between me and Barth no difference of opinion, except the one on the side of Barth that there is a difference of opinion” (18). Brunner does not see any difference between what he believes and what he understands Barth to believe. Barth, on the other hand, sees many differences between his view of natural theology and that of Brunner. Brunner gives six theses to help explain his view of natural theology and why it is important for the church. Barth then goes through each thesis and attempts to demonstrate how it differs from his view of natural theology. In the end, Barth is able to demonstrate that there is a difference between him and Brunner when it comes to natural revelation.

MAN’S IMAGE DESTROYED BY SIN

The first thesis Brunner addresses is the idea that the original image of God in man has been destroyed by sin. Brunner explains two ways to understand the image of God in humanity. The first is the formal image. This is how man is distinguished from the rest of creation. The image of God in us comes from the fact that we are humans and not some other animal. Brunner argues that we are responsible and we have a capacity for words. This is what sets us apart from the rest of creation, and therefore is the image of God in us. This image was not destroyed by sin. Brunner says that, “Even as a sinner man is responsible” (23). However, the material man is affected by sin. He says, “Materially the imago is completely lost, man is a sinner through and through and there is nothing in him which is not defiled by sin” (24). But because of our formal image of God, the capacity to be responsible and the capacity for words, we have a capacity to know God. Here Barth points out that Brunner contradicts himself. If man is a sinner through and through then shouldn’t the formal part of man also be affected? If we are completely sinful as Brunner admits, then are we really able to understand and know God? Do we still have a capacity to know God on our own when our whole being is corrupted by sin? Barth does not disagree with the statement that part of our “image of Godness” is in the fact that we are not any other animal. But he does not see how that in itself gives us a capacity to know God in light of sin. Brunner seems to argue that we are completely sinful and yet still have an ability to truly know God. Barth points out that Brunner seems to be suggesting

that we are able to help God with our revelation and possibly salvation. If we are completely unable to save ourselves apart from Christ then, should it not make sense that we are unable to know God without Christ as well?

THE WORLD IS THE CREATION OF GOD

The second thesis Brunner gives us is that “the world is the creation of God” (24) and that world speaks of God. Brunner argues that “nowhere does the Bible give any justification for the view that through the sin of man this perceptibility of God in his works is destroyed” (25). He says instead that our sin blinds us to these works that are clearly right in front of us. We can see God and have a general knowledge of God from the world before coming to a saving knowledge of him. This is his idea of general revelation. Everyone has access to this knowledge of God. It seems as if he is saying that everyone does have this knowledge of God and recognizes it as God. Brunner talks about how people have to know of God’s law in order to sin. He says that men are aware of their responsibility and “only because men somehow know the will of God are they able to sin” (25). Brunner goes on to explain how this revelation in creation relates to the revelation of Christ. We receive God’s revelation in creation but this revelation is not enough.

We often end up misrepresenting God when we only receive general revelation. We need Christ in order to fully understand the revelation we see in creation and rightly apply it. Barth seems to agree with Brunner that a “real knowledge of God in creation does not take place without revelation” (81). Barth agrees that we cannot and will not rightly apply our understanding of God in creation without the revelation of Christ. However, this is really the only place where Barth and Brunner agree. Barth again points out that despite some agreement between them Brunner’s argument is still inconsistent. He demonstrates that Brunner suggests that we are able to know God in creation apart from Christ and therefore he seems to contradict the idea that man is “entirely lost.” Brunner, according to Barth, argues that we are able to prepare ourselves for the revelation of God in Christ. He adds to the capacity for revelation that we see in his first thesis. We are able to know God, apart from Christ, through his creation.

GOD’S GRACIOUS PRESERVATION

Brunner’s third thesis deals with God’s gracious preservation. He points out that the fact that the world is still spinning and we are still in existence reveals God. Of course because of our sin we could be living in a situation that is much worse than our current situation. The only reason we are where we are is because of God’s grace. Everyone, therefore, is living in God’s general grace. Every person, because they are alive, is able to know God’s general grace before knowing his saving grace. Again, Barth agrees that the existence of creation is a result of grace from God. He agrees that we do not deserve the situation we are in and yes, things could be a lot worse than they are. But, Barth does not agree with Brunner’s idea of knowing God’s general grace before knowing saving grace. He brings up a good point that we cannot understand the significance of preserving grace if we do not understand salvation first.

ORDINANCES OF CREATION

The fourth thesis deals with what Brunner calls “ordinances of creation.” These ordinances are things that Brunner argues all men are aware of and hold as common values. Here he uses the example of marriage. He argues that most people have some idea that marriage is something that was divinely ordained and something that was around before sin. Brunner argues that we need these divine ordinances in order to be truly

human; they are simply part of our nature. We are able to know them without special revelation. Barth, however, raises the issue of how man decides what is divinely ordained and what is not. He points out that humans often have different views on these values that Brunner calls ordinances of creation. If men are sinful through and through, then how are they able to recognize what has been ordained since the beginning of creation and what has not?

POINT OF CONTACT FOR DIVINE GRACE

Another thesis that Brunner presents is a “point of contact for divine grace” (31). This point of contact is basically God meeting us where our capacity for revelation ends. Because we are able to know God through nature we have a place where God meets us with his revelation in Christ. We can meet God halfway through general revelation. As God brings us his saving knowledge and grace, we meet him with general knowledge and grace. Barth again points out how inconsistent this argument is with Brunner’s statement that he would not stray from sola gratia. Brunner claims that we are in need of Christ’s grace only but then he goes and argues that we can know God through creation without Christ. Barth questions whether we can truly know God without saving knowledge in Christ. God comes all the way to us through Christ in order to save us and reveal himself to us.

DEATH OF THE OLD MAN

The final thesis that Brunner gives us deals with the death of the old man. He looks at Galatians 2:20 and 1 Corinthians 2:10-12 for this concept. He points out that when Paul says that Christ lives in him “the formal personality continues beyond the death of the material” (33). Brunner emphasizes that we do not become Christ. Our formal image does not die as the material image does because it is not affected by sin as the material image is. Barth disagrees that the death Paul refers to is only material but not formal man. What Barth also disagrees with is that there is something in these passages that suggest that our life in Christ “is said to presuppose a knowledge of and respect for the true God and that this presupposition forms its point of contact in man” (92). Barth points out that there is nothing in Galatians or 1 Corinthians that suggest this. We do not have any ability in ourselves to be aware of God before he reveals himself to us in Christ.

A RESPONSE TO BARTH AND BRUNNER

While Brunner makes some good points in his essay I found that I mostly agree with Barth on this issue. At first Brunner seems to make decent points, but Barth seems to make better counterarguments. Take for example Brunner’s thesis that we can know God in creation. Simply by reading through Scripture as well as observing the world we live in, this does not seem very likely. If you look at other religions in the world you will find people who see something in creation and come up with their own knowledge of God. All religion, in a philosophical sense, is our attempt to make sense of creation. More often than not, when we rely on general revelation alone we do not find the one true God. Instead we find idols, gods who fit our desires and needs. We see this in Romans 2 where Paul shows that on our own we cannot know who God is by just looking at creation. How is one to know that creation speaks of God without God revealing that to him? Of course, Brunner does say that we are able to better understand creation through the revelation of Christ. But I think that Barth makes an excellent point when he points out the difference between general knowledge of God and saving knowledge of God. Simply knowing God is not the same as having saving knowledge of God, which only comes in Christ. A general knowledge of God without a saving knowledge of him seems to only be knowledge of any god. To know the true God we also need the saving knowledge of him that comes only in Christ.