
AN ASSESSMENT OF THE VIEWS OF KARL BARTH AND EMIL BRUNNER ON NATURAL THEOLOGY AND ITS RELEVANCE TODAY

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is, by investigation into the views of Barth and Brunner on natural theology, to restate and emphasize its relevance for us today—in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. This is achieved via a comparative analysis—by which this research adopts the purely objective method as well as the critical theological analysis and biblical assessment. It is by design naturalistic, which means it is non-manipulative. The research-maintained neutrality and attentiveness to dynamics. The analysis is inductive; given each case its unique orientation, holistic perspective, and context sensitivity. Barth denied that God can be known outside of Christ. This is to say, he is against general revelation but only accepts special revelation. Brunner insists that there is a knowledge of God obtainable in nature — though dimmed as it may be serves as a point of contact between God and man. He accepts general revelation, but it is subservient to special revelation. The position reached in this research agrees more with Brunner, that: natural theology is relevant in that, we can make the most positive use of it for doing theology and witnessing Christ—in our time. While most works on natural theology rests merely on its importance in apologetics, this work have taken it farther, at least, for evangelistic purposes.

Keywords: Natural; Theology; Revelation; Knowledge; God; Nature; Grace.

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, natural theology have witness and is witnessing abundant and increasing revival across many discipline and categories of conversation. Pickering have authored a concise, but sufficient article giving an overview of the general state of art on natural theology in the 21st Century.¹ *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology* address the subject from various different perspectives: Apologetics, feminist theology, Roman Catholic theology, Protestant Theology, Eco-Theology, etc.: “in each of these regions in the

¹ David Pickering, “New Directions in Natural Theology,” in *SAGA Journal of Theology*, 124, no. 5 (2021): 349-357, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0040571X2111043173>. I recommend this article for its concise and sufficient overview of the state of Natural Theology in its multidimensional aspects contemporarily.

theological firmament the stars are aligning in ways that point to natural theology.”² Manning, in the introduction to the Oxford Handbook presents the purpose of the project as an effort to “enrich reflection on the topic and to provoke engagement with the new varieties of natural theology emerging in a range of contexts—from historical and religious studies, constructive theology, philosophy of religion, science-and-religion research, cultural theories, and the arts.”³

The suspicion toward natural theology from the enlightenment to the modern period culminating in the Barth-Brunner debate has now waned as many scholars across disciplines have seen its usefulness in two ways—as Pickering puts it—that: “natural theology can form a mediating structure or a medium of communication.”⁴ The first applies constructivist theologians (such as feminists and eco-theologians) and the second for theistic apologists. This study on the other hand takes it reader a bit back to the Modern period, revisiting the Barth-Brunner debate on the subject and re-emphasizing the importance of natural theology, not just for apologetics, but in evangelism—especially as the times we live in is characterized by radical religious pluralism.

Karl Barth and Emil Brunner both being Neo-Orthodox theologians who agreed with each other on many points came to disagree on some points of which the subject of *natural theology* is one. Despite the fact that the two have disagreements regarding other issues as well, this one on natural theology is terribly the hottest of all their debates. With regard to this very debate their personal relationship (friendship) waned. Brunner made a proposal that, there is a general revelation of God in nature which is valid, but which because of sin, man cannot reduce to a natural theology.⁵ Barth on the other end denied any such revelation of God in nature with his harsh reply, ‘Nein’ (NO!). The heading “Angry Introduction,”⁶ of his introduction is enough to tell the extent of the harshness of Barth's reply. The question of the debate was about the ‘relationship between *nature* and *grace*’.

² Pickering, “New Directions in Natural Theology,” 356.

³ Russell Re Manning, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, eds. John Hedley Brooke, Russell Re Manning, and Fraser Watts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199556939.013.0001>.

⁴ Pickering, “New Directions in Natural Theology,” 354.

⁵ Bernard Ramm, *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids; MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1966), 87.

⁶ Karl Barth, “No! Answer to Emil Brunner” in *Natural Theology*, Ed. Baillie (London: Geoffrey Bles: Centenary Press, 1946), 70.

This famous debate on *Natural theology* between Barth and Brunner regarding the question of the relationship between nature and grace, resulted in a division between the duo and their followers—though there has been debates on the subject which preexisted Barth and Brunner, it only hit its zenith in the history of Christian Theology with them. It appears to mean that Barth won this debate against Brunner—with his reply, the ‘Nein’. But, to win a debate does not mean someone is right; and to lose does not mean the other is wrong.

God’s revelation is in two forms, first, the general revelation—obtainable in nature: second, the special revelation (Holy Scripture). The former *natural*, I claim is prior to the Later which is being repressed, disobeyed, exchanged for lie, disvalued, and as Frame said, those who rebel against it are honored by people.⁷ By way of assessment, I attempt answer the following questions, (1) What could have necessitated the ‘Nein’ reply of Barth to Brunner’s proposal? (2) To what extent does natural theology hold sway on the knowledge of God? And (3) Is natural theology in any sense relevant today?

CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPT

It would be terrible to embark on discussing a theme as this (natural theology) without first clarifying the concepts, considering that, the subject matter has been defined differently by different researchers. Thus, I deem it fit to clarify the following concepts: natural (nature), theology, and natural theology.

Natural

The meaning of the term *natural* would not effectively be communicated unless the word from which it was derived is defined, *nature*. ‘Nature’ by way of definition is, “a creative and controlling force in the universe’ and ‘the external world in its entirety.” A theological dictionary says, “The state of nature is that in which men have not by mutual engagement, implicit or express, entered communities.⁸ Hexham says nature is “the material world”⁹ Simply put, it would mean, the corporeal world and everything it consists of (which include, plants, animals, mountains, oceans, humans, stars, etc.) that is not a product of human creation. *Natural* then mean, ‘of or pertaining to anything that the

⁷ Karl Barth, “No! Answer to Emil Brunner,” 22.

⁸ Charles Buck, *Buck’s Theological Dictionary*. Electronic Copy. np: nd.

⁹ Irving Hexham, *Concise Dictionary of Religion* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 156.

corporeal world (universe) is consist of, which is not created by humans nor any agent else, but God.

Theology

The concept I am defining (Theology), has its origin from Christian and Hellenistic philosophy. I cannot deny them of originating the word as we have in its present form when it is considered etymologically. I am not denying other groups or religions a claim to the usage of the word too. However, while *theology* as a concept originated from the tradition of the Greeks, it obtained its content and method only within Christianity.¹⁰ Allen affirms this in the following statement, “The two main sources of Christian theology are the Bible and *Hellenic* culture, especially Greek philosophy.”¹¹ The term comes from two Greek words, *θεος* meaning God, and *λογος* meaning discourse or study. “It means the study of God, the sacred divine.”¹² I adopt Hexham's definition because it fits right in the context of my discussion.

Natural Theology

This theme has as its elements of composition, *natural* and *theology*, which then mean [according to Hexham], “The Revelation of God in creation... the effort to construct a Doctrine of God without appeal to faith or revelation on the basis of reason and experience alone.”¹³ Ramm projects natural theology to mean, a theology obtained from the general revelation of God in nature.¹⁴ Natural theology thus means, the knowledge of God deduced from the revelation of himself in creation (nature) which being codified (or organized) is systematized.

The above definition suggests a dichotomy or a complete disconnect between the two theologies which does exist, actually. Natural Theology has to stand on its own, only then, can it point to the Revealed (Special) Theology — blending them will be dangerous. It is a standpoint from which one who can see afar or may see into the other. *Revelation*, we must attest, is twofold: natural and special. The *natural* points to the special; and only

¹⁰ Irving Hexham, “Theology” in *the New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 18 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1982), 278.

¹¹ Diogenes Allen, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 1.

¹² Hexham, *Concise Dictionary of Religion*, 154.

¹³ Hexham, *Concise Dictionary of Religion*, 155.

¹⁴ Bernard Ramm, *A Handbook of Contemporary Theology*, 87.

the *special* is inseparably connected to faith. Generally, *natural theology* also spoken of as: *physico theology*, is the arguments for the existence, intelligence, power, and goodness of God based on reason and ordinary experience of the universe. It is so called ‘physico theology’ because it is theology from physical observation of the creation.

BRUNNER ON NATURAL THEOLOGY

For Brunner, natural revelation, i) is prior to special revelation. And this is undeniable so long as it concerns convicting humanity. Romans 1:18-23 shows that, humans are guilty of their sin, since in a sense God has made himself known to them. This is because humans still retain their formal image. ii) When humans undergo natural ordinances there is a natural revelation. Though these ordinances are not realized by humans, they are revealed, and they follow them. iii) Natural revelation serves as a point of contact between humans and God. iv) Natural revelation found ethics.¹⁵ v) Natural theology finds its completion in the revealed word of God. vi) Natural Theology is useful for dogmatics; The Word of God is communicated through language, with reason, and through rationality. vii) That it is useful for knowing the ‘how’ (though not the ‘what’) of ministry. Meaning it informs our practices but is not the substance of our faith. Lastly, viii) For Brunner, natural theology is necessary for evangelism. He concludes by warning that although there is danger in a false natural theology, the church must not reject all-natural theology, instead it must “find the way back to a true theologia naturalis.”¹⁶ Further, he said:

There is, it is true, no valid “natural theology”, but there is a Natural Theology which, in fact, exists. The place to discuss this, however, is not in connexion [sic] with the doctrine of God, for here it has no theological validity, but in connexion [sic] with the doctrine of Man; for “natural theology” is an anthropological fact, which no one can deny.¹⁷

Somehow, it appears that natural revelation is necessary for Brunner. It is prior to the special revelation of God; it foreruns special revelation. One may be right to claim that Brunner made natural theology a requirement for special revelation—though he grant

¹⁵ Brunner, “Nature and Grace” in *Natural Theology*, edited by John Baillie (London: Geoffrey Bless: Centenary Press, 1946), 53.

¹⁶ Brunner, 59.

¹⁷ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics I* (London: Lutterworth, 1960), 133.

the possibility of natural theology leading to idolatry without special revelation through Christ.¹⁸

BARTH ON NATURAL THEOLOGY

He defines *Theologia naturalis* "as a doctrine of a union of man with God existing outside of God's revelation in Jesus."¹⁹ If we go with Barth on this definition, we would no doubt appreciate or even grant his view. This definition he proffered is actually those of Thomism and neo-Protestantism. The implication of this definition is what he goes on to say: "...this mean that in actual fact God becomes unknowable to him [that is man] and he makes himself equal to God. For the man who refuses his grace, God becomes the substance of the highest that he himself can see, choose, create and be."²⁰ So, natural theology is of no importance as long as Barth is concern; because, for him it does not lead to a true knowledge of God. In fact, he denied the existence of natural theology—should that be what it means. Hart portrays Barth as someone who considered himself to be fighting a war against natural theology.²¹ In place of natural theology, Barth speaks of a "knowledge of creation" which can only be seen through Christ.²² Any knowledge obtainable from creation is not a revelation, for revelation, according to him, is given in a salvific experience. Instead, knowledge of creation, when viewed through the Word, can give knowledge about God. "From [Christ] creation derives its meaning."²³

For Barth, Romans 1:18-23 is not about natural revelation of God to all of humanity, but about those who, in Romans 1:16-17, have already received the Gospel.²⁴ Again, this shows that in Barth's thought revelation comes only through Christ.

ASSESSMENT OF THE VIEWS OF BRUNNER AND BARTH ON NATURAL THEOLOGY

In this section, I prefer to do a point-by-point comparison and assessment of the major points of the debate.

¹⁸ Brunner, "Nature and Grace," 26.

¹⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/II*, Ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 168.

²⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/II*, 51.

²¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/II*, 144.

²² G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (London: Paternoster, 1956), 53.

²³ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 54.

²⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 193.

Image of God

Brunner argues for a two-fold image of God in man: i) the *formal* image of God, and ii) the *material* image of God, both existing in humans. This line of argument in Brunner is predicated on his understanding of a two-fold image of God in man.²⁵ Point i) has to do with that aspect of humans that separates them from animals, which is the predicate of their rationality and responsibility.²⁶ Whereas point ii) “designates the capacity of humanity to enter into a relationship with God, which is lost, and requires restoration through grace.”²⁷ Thus, humanity is not without the full image of God, though through sin, lost the material, which is the ability to enter into a relationship with God, but retained the formal, which grant its superiority to the rest of creation. Thus, Brunner holds to the claim that man has ‘certain extent capability’ to respond to God’s revelation in nature. Though Barth in his reply to Brunner (the ‘No!’), appears to be suspicious of Brunner, but did not refute it.²⁸

The question on this point is what actually did man lose as a result of the fall? Did he lose the image of God completely? To this question, the answer is, No! Just as Brunner said, and I concur. This is because, man was created innocent with no inner desire for rebellion, but with the possibility of rebellion which is predicated on his status as free [moral] agent who could make decision between options (this freewill is not a gate to sinning as such, but it placed man on the ground that he could either sin or not sin). But the Devil who hates God, thus hate his creation also, decided to influence man to fall and man fell (though God could have stopped man from falling—having known that man was going to fall, it was His choice not to alter man's freewill in order to remain consistent with His divine nature. And this does not alter the omniscience of God.

To know that something will happen does not by necessity suggest that one should stop it from happening). The fall thus destroyed man’s relationship with God, but not the man. It destroyed man’s innocence, but not the man himself. The case was like of a saintly man caught in fornication. Surely that act would destroy his saintly portrait in the minds of many. But does not destroy his being [hu]man. Though some may say, ‘Ah, yalallace!’²⁹

²⁵ Brunner, *Nature and Grace*, 20.

²⁶ Emil Brunner. “Barth’s Thought on Natural Theology: A Studies of the Debate between Barth and Brunner.” <http://www.jeremiah.org/paper8.html> (Accessed, October 21 2018).

²⁷ Alister E. McGrath, *Emil Brunner: A Reappraisal* (West Suxxex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 119.

²⁸ Barth, “No! Answer to Emil Brunner,” 80.

²⁹ This is a Hausa word (Ah, Ya lallace!) meaning: *Ah, He is destroyed!* “Lallace” means: *destroyed*.

He is destroyed! Meta-linguistically I concur with this statement. But that is just a linguistic expression, in another sense; he did not 'lallace' (he is not destroyed). The same statement, 'Yalallace!' can be translated, 'he has tarnished or destroyed his image!' but *image* in what sense? In this sense, it is that 'portrait of him' that people have; what people take him for, or better still, his 'reputation,' not his image as being human. Thus actually, what man loses is his capacity for relationship with God caused by his rebellion; but still he retains the *formal* and is capable of perceiving God, which led to some degree of the knowledge of God. I posit that, this very *formal* image of God in man is that likeness of God.

Creation of God

Brunner in "Nature and Grace"³⁰ says, "The artist is known by all his works." Here it is obvious that he views the creation as revealing the Creator. He further said, "In every creation the spirit of the creator is in some way recognizable."³¹ Pushing it farther, Brunner said, the fact that man is blind to this revelation because of sin does not in any way suggest that this revelation is destroyed.³² However, Brunner later demonstrates that man's vision is deficient (dulled) rather than blinded; and such a deficient vision, only draws man to gods rather than to God. Brunner believes that the creation itself is a self-communication of God, but this revelation in nature does not lead to salvation. God's imprint remains present in "human conscience, and in history."³³ Only the Christian can make use of this natural revelation well.

On this point, Barth, in his reply³⁴ understands Brunner to mean that God can be known without Christ, though in a distorted and dimmed way (a deficient vision). Barth opposes this without any tolerance. He said, "Without the precedence of the creative Word, there can be ...no proper theology."³⁵ Barth denied any possibility of knowing God without the Word—which is Christ, thus there is no need for any form of natural theology; because he believes there is a sharp distinction between the corporeal world (nature)

³⁰ Brunner, "Nature and Grace," 24.

³¹ Brunner, "Nature and Grace," 24.

³² Brunner, "Nature and Grace," 25.

³³ Edward J. Humphrey, *Emil Brunner* (Waco: Word Books, 1976), 48.

³⁴ Karl Barth, "No! Answer to Emil Brunner," 81.

³⁵ Karl Barth, "No! Answer to Emil Brunner," 81.

and the Word of God. The Word for Barth is threefold: Jesus, scripture, and preaching. He separated the two.

It appears that, Brunner is inconsistent in his separation of the formal and the material image in man's ability of understanding God. However, predicating on Romans 1:18-20, it is obvious that man can know God "...since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (NIV). However, this is acquired by the formal image not the material, for 10: 14 (-17) says, "How can they believe in one of whom they have not heard?" (NIV). And this is the extent to which natural theology hold sway on the knowledge of God.

Preserving Grace and Ordinances of Creation

The third thesis of Brunner as he presented in 'Nature and Grace' was what he term, *preserving grace*.³⁶ By this he means, God does not withdraw from his creation, but continues to maintain it. This way, this act of God's preservation of his creation serves as a protection of creation against total decay—what may have been the worse consequence of sin.

However, Brunner cautioned, "It is necessary to emphasis this specially, as it is in a manner of speaking a dangerous concept, for from it our thinking can easily slip into a pantheistic doctrine of immanence."³⁷ He means that this grace cannot be spoken of correctly without Christ. He emphasized this in 'The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption'.³⁸ By way of summary on this point, Brunner suggests that there is 'also' the grace of creation, preservation—what Calvin called *common grace*—in addition to the grace of salvation. That means Grace is two faceted.

Barth denied this [as per] Brunner's understanding. He questioned, "how far his 'preserving grace' is grace at all?"³⁹ He said, "We are ever and again allowed to exist under various conditions which at least moderate the worst abuses. Does that deserve to be called grace?"⁴⁰

³⁶ Brunner, "Nature and Grace," 28.

³⁷ Brunner, "Nature and Grace," 28.

³⁸ Brunner, "Nature and Grace," 154.

³⁹ Brunner, "Nature and Grace," 84.

⁴⁰ Brunner, "Nature and Grace," 84.

On this point, I disagree with Barth. How could someone deny that this is not at least a kind of the gracious acts of God to his creation (including humanity)? Take for instance, a criminal who was convicted of a crime, that he was by law supposed to be executed because he deserves it, but the judge decided to sentence him to 'life imprisonment.' Is that in itself not an act of grace? We would have no better answer than, 'Yes! It is an act of grace,' it is grace. Barth asked: 'Does that deserve to be called grace?' the answer, of course, is, yes! That deserves to be called grace. I insist that God's grace is unconditional because we know that God's grace is two faceted: his 'common grace' (that grace that preserves creation even after the fall), and his 'special grace.' So, Barth must be wrong. God spared humanity, but allows them suffering—that is a gracious act. This does not mean that the grace of God here is conditional. To say it is 'conditional' means, man has to play a part to be spared, but he did not. God of his sovereign grace spared man who should have died but allowed him live on in suffering instead. This is in itself a favour man did not deserve; because, he deserved to die there and then, but God spared him anyway.

Point of Contact

Brunner on the fourth thesis claimed that, because there is in man the ability for words, which is one of those aspects that make man superior to all other creatures, it serves as a point of contact between God and man; this ability grants the possibly for receiving revelation. He further said, that, "The word of God cannot reach a man who have lost his consciousness of God entirely. A man without conscience cannot be struck by the call 'Repent ye and believe the Gospel.'"⁴¹ Borrowing a lift from Allister McGrath, it is true that this does not hinder the doctrine of *Sola Gratia*; the point of contact only allows man to hear the Word of God, but it does not allow man to believe the Word of God, belief is possible only through divine grace.⁴²

Barth intolerantly disagreed with Brunner on the necessity of a point of contact to allow revelation. He insisted that both capacity for faith (revelation) and faith itself "come like a bolt of lightning out of the blue."⁴³ As Barth struggled to show the relationship

⁴¹ Brunner, "Nature and Grace," 32.

⁴² McGrath, *Emil Brunner: A Reappraisal*, 121.

⁴³ Roger E. Olson, *God in Dispute: "Conversations" among Great Christian Thinkers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 229.

between responsibility and capacity for [divine] revelation—in his reply to Brunner, he suggested that this responsibility and rationality is instead completely ineffective in regard to revelation.⁴⁴

Brunner expects that the natural man has knowledge of God, however distorted it may be, and it is this knowledge that is the point of contact. “What the natural man knows of God ...may be very confused and distorted, but even so it is the necessary, indispensable point of contact for divine grace.”⁴⁵ (Brunner could have said so predicating on the scripture that says: “Ever since God created the world, his invisible qualities, both his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, perceived in the things that God has made. So those people have no excuse at all” (Romans 1:20 GNB). This made it clear that, this knowledge of God in nature can be perceived without the Spirit initiation. Every man is made capable to perceive). But it is at this point that one may be right, if s/he claims Brunner completely fail to distinguish between the material and the formal image of God; because, Brunner appear to have combined the “Natural knowledge of God” with the “capacity for words”. But Hart does try to clarify Brunner’s point, describing *capacity* as a passive possibility as opposed to an active natural ability for [divine] revelation.⁴⁶

Does God need any sort of precondition of man to make himself known to him? Is God in any way limited by human ability or inability? To both questions, I answer: No—predicating on the Reformation principle of *sola Gratia*. In fact, Bird affirms that, God is not limited by human ability or inability since God is completely “other” than creation.⁴⁷ However, that is not to be mistaken for a formula for God. Even with this, God uses various tools to dispense his grace. And the role which natural theology plays could serve as such tools sometimes; because, in reality there is no meeting of two without a point of contact. In as much as God does not need a precondition, there are points at which he encountered each of us.

What could have necessitated the ‘Nein’ reply of Barth to Brunner’s proposal? Firstly, in order to understand the debate, the situation and time within which the duo lived must be brought to fore. Because, once the situation in which the event occurred

⁴⁴ Barth, “No! Answer to Emil Brunner,” 88-89.

⁴⁵ Brunner, “Nature and Grace,” 32-34.

⁴⁶ Trevor Hart, *Karl Bart vs Emil Brunner* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 305.

⁴⁷ Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 71.

and the views arises is relegated to a point that might be best described as irrelevant, misunderstandings or misinterpretations would be inevitable. Thus, in an attempt to establish the light in which we would understand the intolerant reply of Barth to Brunner's proposal, I called to fore the situation and time in which the debate occurred.

The epoch was *Modernism* (c. 20th), birthed from the nineteenth century *enlightenment*. Kim Dorr puts it thus:

...the year was 1934 and the circumstances that enveloped Europe and Germany in particular, were grave and unyielding. Hitler's war machine and the ideals which built it were primed. This was already the "Trojan horse" it had had been delivered to the Church, welcomed and ensconced inside the holy gates, and from which an insidious enemy now poured within the ranks of Christian fellowship and theology. It was not a time for gracious tones or mitigated arguments. It was a time for clarity, for rebuke, and for exclamation points. Just as Dietrich Bonhoeffer saw World War II not as a political struggle, but rather as a battle for the soul of Germany, so one can see that Karl Barth expressed his views on natural theology not in the context of a theological debate, but rather in the eruption of a battle for the soul of the Church. Defining natural theology and tracing its trajectory into Hitler's Aryan supremacy campaign, we will see how this was for Barth his Normandy, a place of such theological import that had to be fought, won, and held.⁴⁸

Secondly, the theological method of Barth must also be considered in order to understand what could have necessitated his 'No!' reply. Barth believes that the only source of Christian theology should be God's word; and this Word of God is in three faces, i) Jesus Christ: the entire history of his life on earth, from birth to his death and resurrection. ii) The written word (Scripture): the written word for Barth is a witness to the divine revelation which is Christ. iii) The word as proclaim (preaching).⁴⁹ Barth is *Christocentric* in his approach to theology. All his theology is centered on Christ. He places Christ at the center of theology. His entire theology gears toward this direction. This is because he believes Christ should be the only medium to the [true] knowledge of God, since only Jesus is fully and decisively the self-revelation of God. For Barth to grant Brunner's proposal would mean, he is inconsistent with his theological method. And this approach of Barth to theology gives his theology its uniformity.⁵⁰ Thus, should someone expect Barth to grant any form of natural theology?

⁴⁸ Kim Dorr, *Karl Barth: His 'No' to Natural Theology* (Np: Winter Quarter 2002), 1.

⁴⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/II*, 222.

⁵⁰ Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Who Needs Theology? An Introduction to the Study of God* (Downers Grove, IVP, 1996), 71.

Thirdly, predicating on Barth's theological method is his definition of theology, which he argues, "is what the Church does to check that what it preaches is actually what God has revealed."⁵¹ His definition clearly closes the door on any form of natural theology. Barth further asserts that, theology (in the sense of Dogmatics), "...measures the language of the Church by the measure of revelation."⁵² Thus, accordingly, theology is to be done by the Church for the Church.

Fourthly, Barth did not grant natural theology on the ground that, i) "God is sovereign and free. Knowledge of Him is a matter of grace. He has revealed Himself in Christ who is alone man's way back to God."⁵³ Again, this point is predicated on his theological method, his Christocentric approach to theology. ii) That, "the argument for *theologia naturalis* are blind alley, by themselves they never add up to encounter with the living God."⁵⁴ Still this point also is predicated on his Christocentrism: where, encounter with the living God is only through Christ.

NATURAL THEOLOGY REDEFINED

Barth rejected the errors of natural theology on three bases, that i) it is unbiblical, ii) it is Thomistic/Roman Catholic, iii) it is derived from the Enlightenment and Neo-Protestantism.⁵⁵ Predicating on points ii) and iii), it thus means, it is against the principles of the Reformation. Well, Barth may be true, if *theologia naturalis* is a property of Thomism/Roman Catholicism and the Enlightenment/Neo-Protestantism. But as it is, it is not. To substantiate this claim that 'it is not,' I will redefine natural theology, to make us see it from a different perspective. But before I do this, let us consider some existing definitions.

Barth:

Defined natural theology as "Every (positive and negative) formulation of a system which claims to be theological, i.e. to interpret divine revelation, whose subject, however, differs fundamentally from the revelation in Jesus Christ and whose *method* therefore differs equally from the exposition of Holy Scripture."⁵⁶

⁵¹ Mike Reeves, "How to Read... Karl Barth," in *From Athens to Jerusalem*. Nottingham (UCCF Book Center. Vol. 7:1, 2006), 10.

⁵² Gordon H. Clark, *Karl Barth's Theological Method* (Philadelphia & Pennsylvania: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1963), 79.

⁵³ Collin Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message* (London: Tyndale Press, 1967), 78.

⁵⁴ Collin Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 78.

⁵⁵ Brunner, "Nature and Grace," 21.

⁵⁶ Barth, "No! Answer to Emil Brunner," 74-75.

Aquinas:

Defined natural theology as “The program for inquiring by light of natural reason alone into whatever truths by natural reason human beings might be able to find about God”⁵⁷

Roman Catholics:

Pushes it farther and say, “Man has not lost the *imago* through sin at all, but only the *dona super addita*, the *Justitia* — or, more properly, the *perfectio originalis*. Sin has, as it were, nothing to do with this question.”⁵⁸

Brunner commented thus:

That, “This means that (to the Roman Catholics) there is an unrefracted *theologia naturalis*. This is a system of natural theology, a self-sufficient rational system, detachable from *theologia revelata* and capable of serving for a solid foundation.”⁵⁹ This Brunner does not grant.

Actually, this is the natural theology Barth rejected. However, Barth later refined natural theology as “The Doctrine of the union of man with God existing outside of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ”⁶⁰ With this redefinition, is Barth saying something different from what he meant in the previous one? You would agree that, he appears to be softer than [harsh as] he was in his *No!* reply to Brunner. Here, Barth’s step toward natural theology begins. He laid down an alternative *natural theology*, but did not call it ‘natural theology,’ rather, ‘secular parables’ in his Church Dogmatics IV/3.1.

Jürgen Moltmann in an interview summarized Barth ‘secular parables’ thus,

At the end of his Church Dogmatics, he [Karl Barth] developed his own Natural Theology. After the special Christian Theology, there can and must be a theology of nature about the many lights outside of the one light of Christ, and the many words of truth outside of the One Word of the Incarnate of God, which is Christ. But the relationship between the Light which is Christ, and the many lights of the world is like the rear-reflectors [sic] of your car. If you switch on the lights of your car, then you can see the reflectors of the car in front, so the lights in nature are only a reflection of the Light of Christ. They do not illuminate anything by themselves; only as a reflection of the Light of Christ.⁶¹

The self-revelation of God in the threefold word (Scripture, Jesus, Preaching), which still is Jesus Christ in all senses, is the leading light which gives us the understanding of God as required—leading to salvation (though Barth denied that these

⁵⁷ James Brent, “Natural Theology: Thomas Aquinas.” in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Eds. Fieser James and Bradley Dowden. <https://www.iep.utm.edu/theo-nat/#H6> (Accessed, 28-10-2018).

⁵⁸ Brunner, “Nature and Grace,” 45.

⁵⁹ Brunner, 45-46.

⁶⁰ Barth, *Church Dogmatics I/II*, 168.

⁶¹ Jürgen Moltmann, “Interview,” 2009. <http://postbarthian.com/2014/07/15/jurgen-moltmann-unfinished-summas-natural-theology/> (Accessed 26-10-2018).

threefold ways have any connection with nature). However, for Barth 'secular' means 'other' light that does not originate from the divine light of God's self-Revelation in Jesus."⁶² Thus, Barth finally left us with the understanding that, apart from the divine light in the self-revelation of God, there are other 'lights' (though *lesser*) which also reveal the knowledge of God.

Therefore, I define natural theology as, the understanding of God received from creation (other 'light') which having been codified, is systematized, and can serve for a tool in witnessing or evangelism. Thus, it is not only useful in theistic apologetics as Stephen Evans views it.⁶³

RELEVANCE OF NATURAL THEOLOGY TODAY

It is important to understand that, when Luther said, "A true theologian does not begin with a foundation of natural theology"⁶⁴ he was rejecting only the kind in Thomistic/Roman Catholic tradition. Thus, I posit that natural theology is relevant for us today—as my redefinition suggests.

How should Christians in this postmodern times, communicate the God of historic Christianity to an inquirer who would not accept the bidding of pre-suppositional Christian apologetics, that relies solely on the Bible? I suggest that, we can let him by the tool of what is obtainable in the corporeal world, to logically see the Truth (Jesus Christ, the Light the world) which as glorious as it is, can illumine his mind, soften his unbelieving heart, and bring him to knowing that, Christianity is not devoid of sound thinking, thus it is not something to be relegated to those who are lazy to thin—as often perceived. With sound arguments, Christians can give explanation of, and reason for our faith to the inquirer who considers himself as intellectual, pulling down strong holds of arguments and make nonsense of all false presuppositions, till they find themselves on their knees at the foot of the Cross where grace and mercy is found. Thus:

First, we cannot afford to discard natural theology, because we need it. We need it in such a sense as *apologetics*, and not just 'apologetics to prove the existence of God

⁶² <https://postbarthian.com/2016/07/22/karl-barths-no-natural-theology-secular-parables-kingdom/>.

⁶³ Stephen C. Evans and R. Mani's Zachary, *Philosophy of Religion: thinking about faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2009), 55.

⁶⁴ Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, thesis #20.

alone, but as platform on which we can proceed to introduce this God as self-revealed through (and in) Jesus—whom would have been an offense to such inquirers.

Second, Natural Theology may serve as a platform on which unbelievers who are inquirers into the *Truth*, yet would not accept the bidding of pre-suppositionalism (as such is the case in this epoch) would be brought to the *truth*—even on their knees. Though we may not be comfortable with the fact that they refuse the bidding of pre-suppositional apologetics. And that is because they are inquirers into the *Truth*. However, we must understand that when someone inquires into a thing, he does not start with the thing, but with something that can lead to the thing. Thus, an inquiry into the *Truth* may not start with it, but somewhere that would lead to it. And so, with regard to the *truth* of God as self-revealed, natural theology can be (or is) that ‘somewhere’ that can lead to the *Truth*.

Thus far in this article, I introduced the research and clarified the operational concepts, I pointed briefly to the fact that Emil Brunner and Karl Barth who were initially friends, parted ways on the issue of natural theology. I presented the views of Brunner and Barth on the subject.

The role of natural theology for Brunner is, to convict humanity of the existence of God. In some sense, all humans know God; therefore, all are guilty of sin. Brunner insists that to enquire about the existence of God, as whether God exist or not thus mean, that one is aware that God exists. “If you really enquire about God ...then you know already that God exists.”⁶⁵ He predicated this knowledge of God in the image of God in man. Natural theology is proved in the fact of man’s ability to carry out natural ordinances; it serves as a point of contact between God and humanity.⁶⁶ Natural theology is useful to theology. Natural revelation, for Brunner, is a necessity.⁶⁷

Barth sees natural theology as a threat to true Christian theology. Natural theology is of no use in Christian theology. There is no point of contact in natural theology with the Christian God. God can only be known in the person of Jesus Christ as God’s self-revelation. For him, revelation and salvation are [almost] inseparable. Therefore, any

⁶⁵ Emil Brunner, *Our Faith* (New York: Scribner, 1936), 9.

⁶⁶ Brunner, “Nature and Grace,” 53.

⁶⁷ Brunner, “Nature and Grace,” 59.

knowledge of God that is to come from creation is not revelation. What he substitutes for “Natural theology” is “knowledge of creation” which is to be seen through Jesus Christ.⁶⁸

Having compared and assessed their views, I thereby gave reasons for their disagreement. Pushing it farther, in the section on the redefinition of natural theology I showed that Barth [in fact] did return to the same point as Brunner. I redefined natural theology as, ‘the understanding of God received from creation (other ‘light’) which having been codified, is systematized, and can serve as a tool in apologetics and witnessing or evangelism.’ I noted that the importance of natural theology is not just to prove the existence of God. And I proceeded to show the relevance of natural theology that, it can serve as a tool in witnessing.

CONCLUSION

I conclude that we can start by what our inquirers (in this category) know. Paul in Athens (Acts 17:16ff) used what the people granted and proceeded to speak to them about God first, then about Christ. The formula that followed this is: first establish the fact of God’s existence, and then introduce Christ. Nature gives the evidence for the existence of God, so that from there we can take a start in our knowledge of Him. That is why to them whom grace did not find, that they too would believe in God, to them whom God have not graciously bestowed the gift of faith, Paul insists that, even without grace finding them, without the gift of faith, they are responsible for their sin (the sin of unbelief), because, they should know through what this corporeal world consists of, that God exists (Rom. 1:18-20). Thus, natural theology is important for us today.

Thus, I am re-emphasising that, natural theology in the Thomistic/Roman Catholic and Enlightenment/Neo-Protestantism sense should be relegated to the annals of Greek philosophy; but as redefined, lay Christians, Christian theologians and philosophers should reconsider it and make the most positive use of it not only in apologetics, or in the area of eco-theology, but also for doing theology and witnessing Christ—in our time.

⁶⁸ Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 53-54.

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