

Nein!
Karl Barth's Answer to Emil Brunner's "Nature and Grace"
By Tami Jelinek

Introduction

In 1934 Swiss theologian Emil Brunner (1889-1966) wrote an essay entitled "Nature and Grace" which he calls a contribution to the discussion with his fellow Swiss theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968), and in which he states "it is the task of our theological generation to find the way back to a true *theologia naturalis*."¹ Barth responded forcefully that same year with his own essay entitled "No!" Barth's answer is a "no" first of all to the premise that there is such a thing as "a true *theologia naturalis*," and furthermore to the "theology of compromise" toward which he sees Brunner's theses concluding. Barth saw the "natural theology" of Brunner to be a "false movement of thought by which the church was being threatened."² This paper will summarize and evaluate Barth's main arguments against Brunner from their common soteriological perspective of *sola scriptura* and *sola gratia*, and also with a focus on the nature and subject of divine revelation. Specifically, we will show that Brunner's assumption of a "point of contact" and a "capacity for revelation" possessed inherently by natural, unregenerate human beings is indeed incompatible with the doctrines of grace he affirms, and represents a departure from the supremacy of the person and work of Christ as the subject of God's self-revelation to us human beings for the purpose of our redemption. Finally we will confront some of the theological ramifications and consequences of Brunner's error toward the way the Gospel is perceived and presented by the Church even in America today.

¹ Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, *Natural Theology* (Eugene, OR: WIPF and Stock Publishers, 2002), 59.

² Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 67.

“Natural Theology” vs. Divine Revelation

Whereas Brunner believed it was “the task of our theological generation to find the way back to a true *theologia naturalis*,” Barth viewed the task as learning to “understand revelation as *grace* and *grace* as *revelation*”³ and therefore turn away from all ‘true’ and ‘false’ *theologia naturalis*.⁴ Barth defines this “true” and “false” *theologia naturalis* thus:

By “natural theology” I mean every (positive or negative) *formulation of a system* which claims to be theological, *i.e.* to interpret divine revelation, whose *subject*, however, differs fundamentally from the revelation of Jesus Christ and whose *method* therefore differs equally from the exposition of Holy Scripture.⁵

According to Barth, what Brunner wants to teach as “natural theology” is that “there is such a thing as a ‘capacity for revelation’ or ‘capacity for words’ or ‘receptivity for words’ or ‘possibility of being addressed’ which man possesses even apart from revelation.” Barth certainly does not dispute that human beings are rational creatures with a “capacity for words” (“man is a man and not a tortoise”), nor does he dispute that we are responsible and accountable before God. But this rationality we possess that makes us human—a humanity which Brunner defines as our “formal likeness to God” which is the “objective possibility of the revelation of God”—does *not* mean, Barth argues, that our “reason is therefore more ‘suited’ for defining the nature of God than anything else in the world. What is the relevance of the ‘capacity for revelation’ to the fact that man is man?”⁶

Regarding the use of natural theology toward unbelievers, Brunner writes, “The wrong way of making contact is, to put it briefly, to prove the existence of God. For this presupposes the

³ “That man is the recipient of God’s Word is, to the extent that it is true, a fact, and it cannot be deduced from anything we might previously know about God’s nature. Even less, of course, can it be deduced from anything we previously knew about the nature of man. God’s Word is no longer grace, and grace itself is no longer grace, if we ascribe to man a predisposition towards this Word, a possibility of knowledge regarding it that is intrinsically and independently native to him.” Excerpted from Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* in Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 147.

⁴ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 71.

⁵ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 75.

⁶ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 79.

Roman Catholic view of *theologia naturalis*, a self-sufficient natural knowledge of God.”⁷ And he continues, “There really is no difference between [Barth and myself] that a false natural theology did great damage to the Protestantism of the last century—or should we say of the last three centuries? And a false theology derived from nature is also at the present time threatening the church to the point of death.”⁸ But then he goes on to accuse Barth of an equally dangerous extreme in his opposition of what he considers the “true *theologia naturalis*” which Brunner considers in step with the teachings of the Reformation and “quite near to Calvin’s doctrine.”⁹

Even Brunner agrees that we do nothing for our salvation, and that “the possibility of doing...that which is good in the sight of God” has been lost. Barth responds, “One would have thought that this included the possibility of receiving the revelation of God.”¹⁰ Both Brunner and Barth agree, “Man is a responsible person, even as a sinner.” And as Barth argues, “If it is honestly not proposed to go beyond stating this formal fact, how can the assertion of this fact serve at all to make revelation something more than divine grace?”¹¹

But apparently, Brunner *has* proposed precisely what he has denied. The question now is raised, by going beyond this “formal fact,” and ascribing to human beings a “point of contact” or “capacity for revelation” outside of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, witnessed by the Scripture,¹² has not Brunner contradicted the Reformation principles of *sola scriptura* and *sola gratia* to which he claims to hold? And a broader question should be asked here: Does divine

⁷ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 58.

⁸ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 59.

⁹ Barth explains in detail in “No!”—a discussion of which is beyond the scope of this paper--why he rejects Brunner’s appeal to Calvin, and believes Brunner has misappropriated Calvin’s writings. Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 59, 99-109.

¹⁰ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 80.

¹¹ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 80.

¹² Karl Barth also taught that the Bible itself is not revelation, but rather a witness to revelation. “Protestants have found some difficulty with Barth’s emphatic assertion that Scripture itself is not to be directly identified with divine revelation...Yet [he] also insists that revelation does not ‘bypass’ this witness. This witness becomes revelation when God speaks through it.” Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: an Introduction*, 5th ed. (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), and 129,155.

revelation *ever* exist apart from divine (sovereign and redemptive) grace? Or to the point of Barth's definitive rejection of so-called "natural theology," can a "revelation" whose *subject* is not the God of Scripture revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ rightly be called "divine?"

Barth goes on to effectively expose the ambiguity of Brunner's assertions, which arguably renders them irrelevant:

[Brunner asserts] that the world is "somehow recognisable" to man as the creation of God. "The creation of the world is at the same time revelation, self-communication of God." And the possibility of recognising it as such is adversely affected but not destroyed by sin. It is not enough to give such knowledge of God as will bring salvation. Moreover, the revelation of God in nature can be known "in all its magnitude" only by him "whose eyes have been opened by Christ."¹³ But it is "somehow" recognisable—though but distortedly and dimly—even by those of whom this cannot be said.....Hence real knowledge of God through creation does take place without revelation though only "somehow" and "not in all its magnitude."¹⁴

But what does Brunner mean that the revelation of God in nature is "somehow recognisable?" It would seem, argues Barth, based upon what Brunner has previously said about man's inability to do anything toward his salvation, that this "somehow recognisable God" of *theologia naturalis* is not in fact the God of Scripture, but rather "one of the creatures of man's philosophical fantasy." This would make so-called "natural theology" no theology at all, but rather a mere

¹³ Regarding Brunner's assertion that there is a revelation of God in nature which can be known "in all its magnitude" only by him "whose eyes have been opened by Christ": While I, with Barth, reject the notion that there is *any* revelation of God in nature (partial, veiled, distorted, minus-its-full magnitude or otherwise) available to *unbelievers*, I do affirm Brunner's idea of a revelation of God in nature—but *only to believers*. The natural, cosmological creation has no spiritual significance, and contains no knowledge of the one true God for unbelievers whatsoever. Barth doesn't address this, but I would suggest that much like the way the witness of Scripture, which is not in and of itself revelation, *becomes* revelation when God speaks through it to reveal himself in the person of Christ, the same may be said of the witness of creation, and the covenantal and kingdom realities it metaphorically represents to God's people.

¹⁴ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 80-81.

“systematic exposition of the history of religion, philosophy and culture, without any theological claims or value.”¹⁵ But in fact, laments Barth,

No, when he speaks of the God who can be and is “somehow” known through creation, Brunner does unfortunately mean the one true God, the triune creator of heaven and earth, who justifies us through Christ and sanctifies us through the Holy Spirit. It is he who is de facto known by all men without Christ, without the Holy Spirit, though knowledge of him is dimmed and darkened by sin, though he is “misrepresented” and “turned into idols.”¹⁶

No wonder Barth is so incensed by Brunner’s suggestion here. How is it that a “revelation” of a “God turned into idols” can be seen simultaneously as the revelation of the one true God? Furthermore, would not *any* knowledge of the one true God—if indeed we believe he has revealed himself ultimately and uniquely in the person and work of Jesus Christ-- have some relevance to salvation?¹⁷ Is it possible to know the one true God “a little bit” or “somehow,” apart from Jesus Christ?¹⁸ Barth continues in this vein:

Moreover, how can Brunner maintain that a knowledge of the true God, however imperfect it may be (and what knowledge of God is not imperfect?) does not bring salvation? And if we really do know the true God from his creation without Christ and without the Holy Spirit--if this is so, how can it be said that the *imago* is materially “entirely lost,” that in matters of the proclamation of the Church Scripture is the only norm, and that man can do nothing towards salvation? Shall we not have to ascribe to him the ability to prepare himself for the knowledge of God in Christ at least negatively? Shall we not have to do what Roman Catholic theology has always done and ascribe to him a *potentia oboedientialis* which he possesses from creation and retains in spite of sin? Has not Brunner added to man’s “capacity for revelation,” to what we have been assured is purely “formal,” something very material: man’s practically proved ability to know God, imperfectly it may be, but nevertheless really and therefore surely not without relevance to salvation?”¹⁹

¹⁵ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 81.

¹⁶ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 82.

¹⁷ According to Donald G. Bloesch, with whom I agree, “God reveals himself fully and definitively only in one time and place, viz., in the life history of Jesus Christ. The Bible is the primary witness to this event or series of events. This revelation was anticipated in the Old Testament and remembered and proclaimed in the New Testament... The Word of God is neither the text nor the psychological disposition of the author behind the text but is instead its salvific significance seen in the light of the cross of Christ.” Robert K. Johnston, ed., *The Use of the Bible in Theology/Evangelical Options*. (Wipf & Stock Pub, 1985), chapter 5.

¹⁸ Cf. John 14:6; Colossians 1:15

¹⁹ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 82.

It does not seem now, upon close examination of what he means by fallen humankind's "capacity for revelation," and his contention that a "point of contact" for this revelation is the natural world, or creation itself, apart from Jesus Christ and apart from the Holy Spirit, that Brunner can avoid a contradiction with *sola gratia*, and *sola scriptura*.

The "Formal" vs. the "Material" *Imago Dei*

For Brunner, the distinction between the "formal" image of God, which fallen humankind retains, and the "material" image of God, which he contends was completely lost at the fall, is important to maintain in order to prove that we all, even though sinners "through and through," and having nothing within us "which is not defiled by sin,"²⁰ are still held responsible--ostensibly for what can be known of God through his creation:

We have to consider the image of God in man in two ways: one formal and the other material. The formal sense of the concept is the human, i.e., that which distinguishes man from all the rest of creation. Thus in the two important passages (Genesis 1:26²¹ and Ps. VIII.) man has not, even as a sinner, ceased to be the central and culminating point of creation. This superior position in the whole of creation which man still has is based on his special relation to God, i.e. on the fact that God has created him for a special purpose—to bear his image...We can define this [formal image] by two concepts: the fact that man is a subject and his responsibility. Man has an immeasurable advantage over all other creatures, even as a sinner, and this he has in common with God: he is a subject, a rational creature. The difference is only that God is the original, man a derived subject. Not even as a sinner does he cease to be one with whom one can speak. And this is the very nature of man: to be responsible...We distinguish categorically: formally the *imago* is not in the least touched—whether sinful or not, man is a

²⁰ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 24.

²¹ It should be noted that not all theologians agree that the "material *imago Dei*" was what Adam lost at "the fall." Nor do all agree that humankind was created possessing the so-called "material image of God" untainted by sin. Was humankind in fact created sinless, or inherently righteous? Brunner's premise here is based on his particular reading of Genesis 1:26 ("Let us make man in our image") and applying it to the creation of humankind as a [righteous and sinless] "living soul," but there are problems with this view (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:47-54 and Paul's identification of the *pre-fallen* "living soul" as that which was mortal, corruptible, and in need of resurrection from the beginning). I would suggest instead that the creation of humankind in the image of God in Genesis 1:26 is prophetic of the New Covenant, and fulfilled by the New Creation in Christ, in all those who now "bear *his* image."

subject and is responsible. Materially the *imago* is completely lost, man is a sinner through and through and there is nothing in him that is not defiled by sin.²²

Brunner contends that this “formal *imago Dei*” is “the fact that man is man” and has both “the capacity for words and responsibility,” and it is this fact that man is “receptive to words” that makes him inherently receptive to the Word of God. “This receptivity says nothing [materially speaking] as to his acceptance or rejection of the Word of God. It is the purely formal possibility of his being addressed.”²³ This “formal image” is the “point of contact for redeeming grace.”²⁴ But as Barth argues, if we are making the fact that “man is man and not a cat” the “point of contact” and “the objective possibility of divine revelation,” then “all objections to these concepts is nonsensical. For this truth is incontrovertible...[But, Barth asks rhetorically,] what is the relevance of the formal responsibility and ability to make decisions to a ‘capacity’ which man possesses and which exists in him anterior to divine revelation?”²⁵ (Barth does not dispute the retention of a “formal *imago Dei*” as initially defined by Brunner, he just doesn’t see it as in any way salvific.) It of course has no relevance, *unless* Brunner is in fact claiming something much more than “the fact that man is man and not a cat” as that which prepares him to receive divine revelation. And as Barth elucidates, this *is* what Brunner is doing, in contradiction of himself and of *sola gratia*:

If we are going to stick to the statement that man is (“materially”) “a sinner through and through,” then the “formal factor” cannot be anything like a remainder of some original righteousness,²⁶ an openness and readiness for God. The concept of a “capacity” has therefore to be dropped. If nevertheless, there is

²² Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 23-24.

²³ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 31.

²⁴ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 89.

²⁵ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 88.

²⁶ Even the negation of the concept of a “remainder of righteousness” suggests that there was an “original righteousness” which Adam possessed prior to the fall. However, Adam was created “naked” (i.e. without the garments of salvation, and therefore in need of the righteousness of Christ which these “garments” represent—making his “nakedness” symbolic of the *absence* of righteousness, cf. Isaiah 61:10; Revelation 3:17-18). Indeed, “nakedness” is never presented as a good thing in Scripture, and this is problematic toward the belief that humankind was created inherently righteous or sinless.

an encounter and communion between God and man, then God himself must have created for it conditions which are not in the least supplied (not even “somehow,” not even to “some extent”!) by the existence of the formal factor. But we have seen that Brunner unfortunately has no intention of stopping at this formal factor. The reason for this is that he departs from the statement that “man is a sinner through and through,” thus contradicting the exposition which precedes it. For he has by now also “materially” enriched and adorned man in his relation to God to an amazing extent. “The sphere of this possibility of being addressed” includes not only the *humanum* in the narrower sense, but everything connected with the “natural” knowledge of God. Moreover, “the necessary, indispensable point of contact,” which before was defined as the “*formal imago Dei*,” has now, as it were, openly become “what the natural man knows of God, of the law, and of his own dependence upon God.”²⁷

And yet we know that the “natural man” knows nothing of God, for “God is Spirit,” and “no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God.” As for the “natural man,” or the “unspiritual person,” the things of the Spirit of God are “foolishness” to her; she “is unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (cf. John 4:24; 1 Corinthians 2:11, 14-15). And what does “the natural man” know of the law? Paul said he was once “alive without the law” and would never have known what it was to covet, had not the law—which was not naturally known to him—said, “thou shalt not.” Or as God inquired of Adam in the garden, “who told you that you were naked?” It was the commandment, divinely and specifically revealed to him, which brought “death”—and the knowledge of sin pictured by the shame of his “nakedness” before God (cf. Romans 7:7-9; Genesis 3:11). Finally, it could certainly never be said that we as human beings naturally acknowledge our dependence upon God. There is no one who *naturally* seeks him, it is by him only that we even mention his name, and faith is required to even believe that he exists (cf. Romans 3:11; Isaiah 26:13; Hebrews 11:6).

We conclude with Barth then that Brunner’s original distinction between the “formal” and “material” *imago Dei* was of no consequence at all, for “evidently the ‘formal *imago Dei*’ meant

²⁷ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 89.

that man can ‘somehow’ and ‘to some extent’ know and do the will of God without revelation.” Brunner has not in fact adhered to the principles of *sola scriptura* and *sola gratia* he claims to affirm, for if he had, Barth argues, “the purely formal statement that man is man would have been seen to be irrelevant...and the question of the ‘point of contact’ might then have occurred to Brunner in the context of the doctrine of Christ, of the Spirit, of the Church, but not of man.” Thus, Barth rightly concludes, Brunner has also “been unable to adhere to *sola fide – sola gratia*.”²⁸

So-called “Preserving Grace” and “Creation Ordinances”

Brunner, presumably alluding to (and misconstruing) Romans 1,²⁹ states, “The reason why men are without excuse is that they will not know the God who so clearly manifests himself to them.”³⁰ And Brunner contradicts Scripture here: “Only because men somehow know the will of God are they able to sin. A being which knew nothing of the law of God would be unable to sin—as we see in the case of animals.”³¹ Actually, “sin was already in the world” before the law was given; yes, before humankind knew *anything* of the law of God, we were sinning. As Paul says (very likely speaking both of Adam’s experience in the garden and corporately of all those

²⁸ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 96.

²⁹ The “without excuse” argument based on a universal, cosmological reading of Romans 1:18-32 is common, and is one of the two major proof-texts for “natural theology,” the other being Psalm 19. However the context of “the creation” of Romans 1 does not support this interpretation (nor does the context of “the heavens” of Psalm 19, which metaphorically pictures God’s people declaring the Gospel or glory of God, cf. Romans 10:18). Rather, those who were “without excuse” in Romans 1 were those against whom the wrath of God was about to be revealed in the first century. They were those members of Old Covenant Israel who had been given the special and particular revelation of the law of God (*not* of “nature”), designed to lead them to the truth of the Gospel of Christ, whom they rejected in favor of their self-righteousness and their idolization of the law. In Barth’s commentary on Romans, he glosses over the specific referent of these who were “without excuse,” missing the opportunity to negate the application of this passage toward “natural theology.” Although this was probably not his purpose, as his primary focus in his commentary on chapter 1 is on the Gospel as “the clear and objective perception of what eye hath not seen nor ear heard...and a communication which presumes faith in the living God, and creates that which it presumes.” Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 28.

³⁰ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 25.

³¹ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 25.

subsequently “in” Adam), “I was once alive apart from the law [knowing nothing of it], but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died, and the very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me (Romans 7:9-10; cf. Romans 5:13). But Brunner continues to maintain that the cosmological creation is a “witness” to the “heathen” (apart from God’s revealed law, apart from his divine grace, or the revelation of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit—and *without faith!*): “Even the most perfect theology will in the main be unable to get beyond the double statement that as concerns the heathen, God did not leave himself without witness, but that nevertheless they did not know him in such a way that he became their salvation.”³² To restate the questions we posed above: *Does revelation ever exist apart from divine, redeeming grace? Is it possible to know the true God even a little, yet that knowledge has no relevance to salvation?* Surely our answer to these must be, *Nein!* and *Nein!* There is in fact no witness to the “heathen”—to unbelievers, outside of Christ—in the natural world, called “creation.”

But for Brunner, the consequence of creation’s witness to the heathen (albeit a witness which he admits leads to a knowledge of God that will not lead to salvation) is that all “human activity comes within the purview of divine grace—not of redeeming but of preserving grace.”³³ However, true “preserving grace” (or what the Bible calls “the rain which falls alike on the just and the unjust,” cf. Matthew 5:45) is *not* the same thing as revelation. But in relating his redefined “preserving grace” to revelation, Barth argues, Brunner has included “an entire sphere (one which is, as it were, preparatory to revelation in the proper sense) in which the Reformers’ principle of *sola gratia* cannot possibly be taken seriously.”³⁴

³² Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 27.

³³ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 29.

³⁴ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 85.

Regarding so-called “ordinances of creation” (for example the “ordinance” of marriage we see pictured in the garden story) Brunner states, “Although they are understood correctly only in faith, they are and remain for the believer divine ordinances of *nature*. This means that they do not belong to the realm of redemption, of the church, but belong to the realm of divine preservation, in which natural impulse and reason are constituent factors.”³⁵ Brunner’s assumption that the Genesis creation story is about “nature” or the natural, cosmological world³⁶ leads him to the erroneous notion that “natural impulse and reason” are points of contact for “divine ordinances.” Regarding these “ordinances of creation,” and specifically the ordinance of matrimony which he contends is revealed in creation (apart from God’s law) Brunner says that “through the preserving grace of God they are *known* also to natural man as ordinances that are necessary and somehow holy and are by him respected as such”—even by those “who are ignorant of the God revealed in Christ.”³⁷ Seriously? Is the “God revealed in Christ” a *different* God now to Brunner, than the God whose “preserving grace” reveals his “divine ordinances” to unbelievers, who (somehow?) respect them as holy? Barth exposes the fallaciousness of such an assumption this way:

If we consulted instinct and reason, what might or might not be called matrimony? Do instinct and reason really tell us what is the *form* of matrimony, which would then have to be acknowledged and proclaimed as a divine ordinance of creation?...And who or what raises these constants to the level of commandments, of binding and authoritative demands, which, as divine ordinances, they would obviously have to be? Instinct and reason?³⁸

The idea that there are “divine ordinances” of creation which are evident to natural men and women is an example of where a universal, cosmological understanding of the “creation” of Romans 1 can lead us. For *if* the *law* (which I contend is the subject of Romans 1, not

³⁵ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 30.

³⁶ I assert that the context of Genesis creation is covenantal, rather than cosmological.

³⁷ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 85-86.

³⁸ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 86.

cosmological creation) which God gave to Israel by special revelation, for the purpose of leading her to Christ (cf. Galatians 3:24), can be realized, argues Barth, “‘to some extent’ without Christ, how much more must ‘capacity for revelation’ mean than merely the formal fact of man being human, *i.e.* a formal and rational subject! Where, where has the distinction of formal and material *imago* got to? It is now purely arbitrary to continue to say that only holy Scripture may be the standard of the Church’s message [*sola scriptura*], that man can do nothing for his salvation, that it takes place *sola gratia*, that the church must be free from all national and political restrictions! If man is from the start, and without the revelation and grace of Christ even ‘to some extent’ on such good terms with God.... why are we suddenly so exclusive?”³⁹

The Consequences of *Theologia Naturalis* toward the Gospel

It is important to understand what Brunner saw as the significance of his *theologia naturalis* for the church in his day, and why Barth had such a strong objection to it—*i.e.* why he believed it was so dangerous, and a “threat to the church,”⁴⁰ in order to assess its significance to us today, a generation and counting later. Barth graciously summarizes Brunner’s aim this way:

He wishes to carry on pastoral work among intellectuals, to instruct modern youth, to carry on the discussion with the unbelievers. He wishes to be a Christian pedagogue in the widest sense of the word, a preacher, a moralist, and lastly also a dogmatic theologian.⁴¹

Barth affirms this as his own purpose and duty as well, although he is “of the opinion that the order ought to be somewhat different.” And he and Brunner would both agree that they, with every other theologian, are faced with the double question: “What has to be done? And: How is it

³⁹ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 87.

⁴⁰ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 67.

⁴¹ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 122.

to be done?”⁴² But as Barth goes on to explain, Brunner’s elevation of the How to the level of the What is the reason “Brunner cannot dispense with natural theology.”⁴³ It is probably fair to say as well, that his pre-occupation with the How is what ultimately led him to reject the virgin birth.⁴⁴ Apparently the miraculous is an insufficient answer to the How for Brunner. If the How cannot be answered with “natural” reason, he apparently fears the church will be irrelevant and therefore ineffective in its mission. Or to summarize a consequence of his *theologia naturalis* another way, there has to be a “formal point of contact” *naturally* inherent within a person, independent of divine revelation, in order for the church to do its work: “*The Church also is dependent upon the possibility of speaking to man of God at all*”⁴⁵—in other words, the Church also is dependent upon humankind’s “natural capacity” for revelation—apart from faith, apart from grace, apart from Scripture. But Barth counters (with a message perhaps even more applicable to our time and place in 21st century America than it was to his):

What Prophet, what apostle could—as far as he was true to his mission—hit upon the idea that he was dependent on this “at all?” Does not this sentence betray a theory which thinks that as regards theological and ecclesiastical practice it must find help elsewhere than in the revelation of God—and thinks that it has already found it? If we base theological and ecclesiastical practice upon this sentence, do we not forget entirely that only God can be called to witness for God, that therefore the word of man cannot witness to the Word of God? Is that sentence to be understood otherwise than as a statement of human fear, wit and agility, which thinks that it has to improve upon what God has done well and will do well, which is chiefly concerned with *success*, and not the command, the promises, and the end? Alas for the Church, of which what that sentence says is true! Alas for theologians, who in order to speak of God truly and as Christians must first strive “to speak of God at all!” Alas for the congregations, the “intellectuals,” the youth who sooner or later will only hear “of God at all!” For when have things taken a

⁴² Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 122.

⁴³ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 123.

⁴⁴ “Brunner found a subtle incompatibility between the virgin birth and both the incarnation and Jesus’ humanity,” and believed that the birth accounts in the Bible are incongruous with the pre-incarnate existence of the Son. He also believed that if Jesus had no human father he wouldn’t have been born the way the rest of us are and therefore couldn’t be considered fully human. Stanley James Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 318.

⁴⁵ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 124.

different course? Alas for the world, if in spite of the birth, death and resurrection of Christ, “the Church also” is “dependent” upon “that.”⁴⁶

But what of the How? Are we unconcerned with it? No, Barth’s point is simply that the How cannot (should not) be pursued apart from the What. And that if we were truly “caught” by the What, and “by the knowledge of that victorious power,⁴⁷ by the necessity of that confidence, conditioned by the activity of that love and perseverance—could we even for a moment seek the How outside of the What?”⁴⁸ In short, the How is me, you, us, them, it is the entire experience of our lives, in every time and place; it is “the cosmos of nature and history.” The How is “man, in whose sphere there exist, among other things, theology and the Church. But man is a being that has to be overcome by the Word and the Spirit of God, that has to be reconciled to God, justified and sanctified, comforted and ruled and finally saved by God. Is that not enough? Is not every addition to that merely a subtraction from it?”⁴⁹

Whereas Brunner believed “the task of [his] theological generation was to find the way back to a true *theologia naturalis*,” I believe the task of ours is to find the way back to the Gospel, which is, was, and always will be *the* power of God unto salvation.

⁴⁶ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 125.

⁴⁷ Cf. Romans 1:16

⁴⁸ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 126.

⁴⁹ Brunner and Barth, *Natural Theology*, 126.