

Barth and the Lessor Lights: Seeing God Outside the Church

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- [0 : 00] Good to be with you all again. I'm going to be back in June, and if I can find the time, I'm going to do a follow-up session to the session I did last time for you all on the Crusades. We'll follow up with some theological questions linked to the Crusades that came out of a discussion I had with J.I. Packer after that session. So we'll see. I've got it planned. If time and health allow, then I'll do that.
- So today we're going to be looking at some of Karl Barth's thought, but I want to begin just with a couple of statements slash questions that help us to frame the significance of this discussion.
- So statement number one, Jesus Christ is the sole source of human salvation. Nobody knows God apart from Jesus Christ. Statement number one. That's a statement that has often been met with controversy, and its plausibility and reception seem to be faring all the worse at our particular moment in history.
- So I'm sure that's been the case at other moments in the past. It's a statement that has an exclusivist tone, and because of that exclusivist tone, it's a statement that's subject to animosity and incredulity.
- [1 : 15] That statement stands at a loggerheads with the spiritual mentality that is represented by a bumper sticker that you see from time to time in cities like Vancouver.
- Yeah. So. Right. The factors at play in the mentality that is represented by this bumper sticker are various.
- Yes. If you were to kind of explicate that philosophy that's represented by this symbol, one influence would probably be romanticism, the romantic movement. That's a movement that's the seedbed for the individualism, the pluralism, and the relativism that prevail in our present age.
- If you look at it more from an academic perspective, you might turn to the impact of Ernst Troeltsch's history of religions philosophy. He was an influential thinker, and his thoughts suggest that there is no final revelation of God among humanity.
- There is no final revelation of God among humanity. So those influences, they denigrate the idea of monotheism, and they lend themselves to paying homage to lots of different spiritualities, life force, world spirit, whatever else.
- [2 : 39] And so in an atmosphere like ours, it's hardly surprising that there's not a lot of hospitality towards the claims of scripture, such as those that I referenced earlier.
- Jesus Christ is the sole and exclusive base for salvation. This is sometimes known as the scandal of the particularity. You may have heard that phrase before. Which is a scandal that allegedly besets Christianity.
- Are not the doctrinal claims of the church myopic, prejudicial, and sensitive? So that's the first statement. The second statement I want to make as we enter into this discussion is as follows.

This is in my own handwriting, not typeset, so let's hope I can read it. But Jesus Christ reveals himself in the world through scripture and the church.

But is that the limit? But is that the limit? Right? The revelation of Jesus Christ of God through Jesus Christ comes through scripture and, you know, in the life of the church.

[3 : 46] But is that the limit? Now, taking that question, that statement into account is, you know, presents certain challenges that we wrestle with as Christians.

That statement is very much bound up in our understanding of our vocation to be witnesses for Christ. And of God's own self-witnessing in the world through Christ.

And that question, as well as the first statement, together lead us to ask this question. Does God self-reveal apart from scripture and the church? Can God be found in other places?

Even in other religions? These are the types of questions that we're coming to today. Or to put it another way, can God be seen and encountered outside of the church?

Now, that's a question that's of interest to me. And I suspect it's probably a question that's of interest to some of you. And more importantly, for today's purposes. It is a question that is and was of interest to Karl Barth.

[4 : 50] So we're going to enter into a little bit of conversation with him about this. Now, what I want to do is give some attention to an intriguing but somewhat understudied aspect of Karl Barth's thought, which is known as his Doctrine of Little Lights.

Actually, there's kind of an elegance to that phrase. This is laid out in church dogmatics, as you can imagine, which is very long.

So more specifically, for those who might want to go and read about it later this afternoon or this evening, it's in volume 4.3. Volume 4.3 of church dogmatics. There's 13 or 14 volumes in that.

The thesis here is simple. In conversation with Barth, we're reminded that we should expect to encounter God in the world, namely outside of the special revelation of Scripture.

Now, those who are familiar with Karl Barth's thought will discern that that thesis, that statement, seems out of character for someone like Barth. And I'm going to talk about why it seems out of character in just a moment.

[5 : 53] Nonetheless, that is what Barth asserts. God operates in the world and does reveal himself. But the God that reveals himself in the world, and apart from Scripture and outside the church, is not a generic God.

It's not the God that perhaps stands in the philosophy behind that symbol we just looked at. But rather, it is the God that is known to us in Jesus Christ. It's the God that we know as Trinity.

So, examining Barth's doctrine of little lights, what we're going to do, this is how I would characterize what he's offering. We're going to get access to a theological construal of what it means to experience God, to hear from God, to encounter God, outside of the kind of chief ways that that happens, through Scripture, being one of the chief ways.

So, how do we talk about that theologically? If you've been to a charismatic church, you know that that's very much an experiential reality. But how do you talk about it theologically? That's what Barth's trying to do. He's a theologian.

That's what he does. That's what he did. Now, Karl Barth, an odd God, an odd guide. An odd guide for this question. Yes and no. If you know anything about Barth, you know, he doesn't seem like the most natural guide for the question that we're wrestling with.

[7 : 13] You know, can you see God outside the church and apart from Scripture, right? He's not the person you go to when you think about interreligious dialogue. His theology is not apologetic in nature, which means he's not trying to talk about God and Christian salvation in a way that makes sense to the world.

He's trying to just talk about it in a way that's faithful to the revelation of Scripture, right? That's a very different, those are two very different goals. So, why would I pick someone like Barth to be a tutor to us on this question today?

Again, that's perplexing, but chiefly because, and this is what I was referencing earlier, what some of you might know, Barth is very famous for his remonstrations against natural revelation, natural theology.

To both of which his response was, Nah, no, that's not where you find God, that's not how you know God, right? That's a major, major theme of his work.

And his opposition to natural or general revelation and natural theology is based, it's got a historical argument against it, and it's got a theological argument against it.

[8 : 22] Now, before I go further, and for the benefit of those who might not be familiar with these categories, does everyone know what we mean by natural theology, general revelation?

No. Okay, so let's stop and explain that so that what I say next will be intelligible to you. Okay, so the way Barth puts it is that there are sort of two, and this is an inherited way of thinking, he didn't come up with this, but there's two ways of thinking about how we know God.

We know God through his special revelation, and that's a capital S, right, which refers to knowing God through Jesus Christ and through the testimony of Christ in Scripture, which is an account of the revelation of God.

And then on the other hand, there's this other alleged source of knowledge for God. It's referred to as either natural revelation or general revelation, and that means you look around the world, which God made, and you can make inferences about God from what you see.

Does that make sense? So you might say one's about looking up to know God, and one's about looking out to know God, right? God made creation in the cosmos, those fingerprints are on it, and you can know something about God from that.

[9 : 36] Barth does not like that second way of knowing about God at all. To that he says nine. Now he says nine, no to natural theology, general revelation, for historical and theological reasons.

So let me briefly introduce these reasons to you. The historical basis owes to his experience in Nazi Germany. This is the time in which he lived.

And according to Barth, there is, quote, a clear and logical path from natural theology to Nazism. He explains that in great detail.

I'm not going to go into great detail with it, but that's his determination. Nazism signifies the realization of all that is, quote, implicitly granted or implied by all forms of natural theology.

Now that, he was so strong in that sentiment, it actually cost him one of his most important friendships. Friendship with another theologian called Emil Brunner. They had a very famous public disagreement about this issue.

[10 : 47] And Barth wrote a very famous essay that was published publicly called Nine to his friend Brunner. As Brunner was trying to defend the possibility of natural theology. And Barth said, no, you only know God by looking at Jesus Christ.

And it wasn't just an academic debate. They never talked again for the rest of their lives. Okay. But again, you need to remember that all of this was transpiring during that period of time.

So things were tense. Okay. The stakes were high. It wasn't, it was not just an academic debate. Barth also has a theological reason for rejecting natural theology.

And this is based on his exegesis of scripture. Sounds like a good Calvinist here. The, there may be a general revelation of God in creation, but because of sin, and because of the effects of sin on human beings, it's, we're not able to rightly discern it.

So, we can see, but we don't perceive. Does that make sense? You can look around, and you know what Psalm 19 says is true. They haven't declared the glory of God. Right?

[11 : 53] But how do they do that? And what do we know about God from that? Well, we just get confused. Because of sin. That's called the noetic effect of sin. That's how Barth describes that. And so what happens as a result of, of our, of the temptation to look out and say, how do I know about God from those mountains?

Or how do I know about God from my own human nature, for example, right? Is that we end up, we say we're doing natural theology, but actually we're not really talking about God. We're talking more about ourselves, our own ideas.

We're projecting things onto God. And you end up with a very different picture of God than the one that is revealed in Jesus Christ. Does that make sense? Okay. So, for those reasons, Barth says that the revelation of God that you want to pay attention to is the redemptive revelation of God, which is his way of saying what we know about God from Jesus Christ.

Okay. Barth says that only through Christ can humans, quote, know for certain what creation is, who the creator is, and what it means to be a creature of this creator.

Okay. And so he urges the church to, quote, speak solely and exclusively out of the word of God. Because that's where God is known. Right. So Christian theology, knowledge of God, should always be birthed out of special revelation, to use Barth's term.

[13 : 18] Right. It should be derived from what we know about God through Jesus Christ. Not from the bush. Not from the mountain. Not from our own human nature. Okay. Now, does that, given what I've just said, do you understand why it's a little bit odd that we're turning to someone like Karl Barth for a lesson on finding, you know, encountering God outside of Scripture and outside of the church?

Right. Does it seem a little bit odd? Okay. Yeah, it seems a little bit odd, right? I ran everything that I've just talked about in terms of his rejection of general revelation, natural theology. That comes from an earlier period of his life.

And what we're looking at today comes from a later period of his life. So perhaps he mellowed a bit. But I do still think that he's consistent. I do still think he's consistent. And we'll see this. Let's see.

I've got some little clippity-clips. There we go. Let me give voice to Barth's sentiments here. For Karl Barth, just to kind of summarize what we've just said, God's special revelation, which is found in Scripture, in Jesus Christ in Scripture, it does not complete what we know about God from creation as much as disrupting it and rebuilding it.

So he sees an antithesis, and again, that's because the effect of sin makes it difficult for us to rightly make inferences about God from creation. So what we know about God and Christ is often going to disrupt and rebuild what we think we know about God from creation.

[14 : 52] Again, if you know anything about the Nazi regime, you'll know that there were theologians that were employed kind of indirectly in the service of the Third Reich to develop a theological basis for German hegemony at that time.

So this is what Barth's reacting against. And what they were doing is they were looking at the German people. They were looking at themselves and saying, we're a superior race. We're organized.

We're efficient. This is the rhetoric of that time. This is not a characterization of Germans today, by the way. Right? You know, and based on all these wonderful qualities that we exhibit collectively as a people, the qualities associated with Arianism, I suppose, right?

We therefore deduce that God has created us to rule over all others. Okay? You see, that's how general natural theology works. Well, that is not what Jesus Christ says. Right?

So Barth's saying there's a huge disparity between what you think you know about God from looking in the world and creation, and we're part of creation, and what we know about God from what Jesus Christ says. Right?

[15 : 55] So, he talks about not lowering power over people, for example. Okay? So, in light of all that, it's a little bit surprising that we turn to Barth as a guide today, but don't prejudge.

I actually think he has something good to offer, and I do think there's a consistency at play. Now, Barth's discussion of little lights falls in the context of a long rumination about the function of Jesus Christ as the prophet of reconciliation.

That's one of the ways he depicts Jesus Christ. He's the prophet of reconciliation. It's a beautiful discussion. Now, in this theologizing about Jesus Christ as the prophet of reconciliation, Barth, following the idiom of the New Testament, talks about Jesus as the light of life.

That's the language of the New Testament. Right? Now, in the final portion of this long and beautiful reflection, Barth delves into a relationship between Jesus Christ as the one word of God, the word made flesh, and what he calls other words that attest to the one word of God while yet not being quite identical to it, or to him, we should say.

Okay, so it's being to get a sense that when Barth speaks about the word of God, there's kind of layers and levels, and this is important to understand as we enter into his doctrine of little lights.

[17 : 21] Barth has a very famous way of talking about the word of God. It's called the threefold word of God schematic and this is kind of a hallmark of his theology. So, Barth says, when you speak about the word of God, you have to speak about three things.

And this may actually help answer some questions because you know in the New Testament, the word of God is a phrase that's used but sometimes you get the impression that means slightly different things along the way. Like sometimes, you know, for example, it's referring to Jesus Christ but then sometimes you think it's referring to Scripture.

Right? You can tell, right? In John's prologue it's clearly referring to Jesus. He's called the word of God but elsewhere Paul writes about the words of the word of God and you think that's in reference to Scripture. So, Barth's kind of paying attention to that and he offers this threefold schematic.

He says, in the first place the word of God is Jesus Christ. In the second place the word of God is the words of Scripture which are a testimony a witness to the capital W word of God.

Does that make sense? But then he goes on and he says in the third place there's another form of the word of God and the third form is the kerygma of the church.

[18 : 31] That's the New Testament word for the proclamation of the gospel. The kerygma. Right? What the apostles preached. So, it's like the word of God is Jesus Christ the word of God is Scripture and then the word of God is Scripture and Christ preached.

Or really Christ preached but in conversation with Scripture. So, the threefold schematic of the word of God. Now, given the fact that this schematic is very dominating in all of his thought what he introduces in this little section on this doctrine of little lights is going to raise some eyebrows because in this section Barth speaks of a new form or another form of God's word.

He calls it this is the Latin phrase he calls it *extramuros ecclesiae*. Right? And so, you might recognize if you know Latin you know what it means and if you don't you might know at least what that means.

Remembrance to the church. Yeah. So, this concept appears it's introduced here and Barth refers to this as another circle of witnesses point to God.

Right? This type of this additional form of God's word is one that hails from outside the church but serves the same function as the other which is to point to the capital W word of God Jesus Christ.

[19 : 57] Right? And so, what we have here is kind of a new degree of nuance in how the revelation of God of himself to us works. Right? It comes through Jesus Christ it comes through scripture it comes through preaching but it comes in another way too, Barth says.

And that fourth way is designated by the phrase outside of the church. Right? Now, how does Barth explain this fourth layer of God's word?

He says a few things about it that are worth noting. Number one, he says that this additional form of God's word, if it is truthful, right, it must be quote, in closest material and substantial conformity and agreement with the one word of God himself, Jesus Christ.

Okay? Number two, he says that this fourth form of God's word can never be fully equated with Jesus Christ, the one word of God. Right? So, it can't disagree with the one word of God, Jesus, but we can't say that it is the one word of God, Jesus, either.

Right? These are kind of subtle distinctions he makes so as to avoid being misunderstood. So, it's a truthful word in the sense of it has the truth of God indwelling in it, but it can't be equated fully and wholly with the one word of God, Jesus Christ.

[21 : 20] Rather, it's kind of a reflection of the one word of God, Jesus Christ, in an approximating way. And thirdly, this is very important, but reminds that the potency, the efficacy of this fourth form of God's word is bound up with God's action.

So, again, it is divine revelation. It's bound up with God's action. Right? And if we hold that in mind what we just said a minute ago, it means that God is acting to reveal himself outside the church, apart from scripture, in a sense.

That's what Barth is saying here. Now, Barth goes on as he elaborates to suggest that God can use anything for this type of revelation, and he calls this type of revelation a little light.

That's what he calls it. He calls it a little light. And Barth says God can use anything to be a little light. Remember Balaam's ass? Right? God can use anything.

Okay? Now, in our time, as Barth reflecting on this, he says God can use secular movements and realities that are not connected to the church in any formal way. He can use those to reveal himself.

[22 : 40] He says that, but again, he says that any time God does that, it's going to be done in a way that's subjugated to what God has already done in Jesus Christ.

So these little lights, their function are used by God to radiate the truth of God as God is known in Jesus Christ. So in expounding on this, Barth says here, let me give you an analogy for what I'm talking about because he's quite abstract up to this point.

I'm reading it, I'm like, okay, I kind of get what you're saying, right? You're affirming something as a possibility in a rather abstract way. And Barth says, okay, let me give you an analogy to help understand. And in his analogy, he looks to the parables of Jesus.

Okay? He says, in the form that they come to us, the parables of Jesus are replete with everyday mundane images and symbols from earthy human existence in the Middle East at that time.

Right? Yet, as those parables are deployed in the service of God's one word, Jesus Christ, they assume a strange quality, don't they? Right? There's something odd about the communication that's going on there.

[23 : 52] Right? They're suffused with ordinary settings and motifs, but yet, they wouldn't fit easily into a newspaper or into some sort of event report. Right?

As sublimated by the one word of God, they are vested with a revelatory quality. They serve to reveal something about God. Right? And so, their meaning and reference transcends what first meets the eye.

Does that make sense? So, that's his go-to analogy. Now, what does this mean? It means for Bart that when you think about knowing God and encountering God, you need to be prepared to eavesdrop on the world.

And it's at this point, this discussion that he introduces, this is the German term, I don't speak German, my wife's French, so I'm working on that right now. But these are the two German words that we translate as little lights.

This is where they're introduced in. And he uses these words to refer to the existence of sort of secular parables of God's word in the world.

[25 : 02] Secular parables of God. And when Bart speaks of secular, he just means it's not a revelation that comes from reading the Bible or hearing the Bible preached in church. It comes from somewhere else.

That's what he means by secular parables. And he says that their bona fide existence is something that the Christian community needs to accept. Faith, as is always the case, is the seminal tool that we need to recognize these little lights.

Faith is the means by which we can encounter and discern these little parables and see how they are illuminating the word of God. And what we know about God is he's known through Jesus Christ.

Now, how are they distinguished from the other forms of God's word? Scripture and preaching. That's what Barth says here. He says they're distinguished chiefly because they serve to illuminate God's word in a particular time and situation, a particular moment, confirming it to us in the deepest sense by helping to make it sure and concrete and evident and certain to us.

So they strengthen faith. That's what their purpose is. And this way you might say they're a gift from God to us. Now, at this point, Barth feels the need to kind of provide a further biblical justification for his assertion that there is this fourth form of God's word in the world, this form that exists apart from scripture and outside the church.

[26 : 32] And so he says, let me tell you why I think this is a reality that we need to acknowledge. He says, because it's a reality that is in scripture itself. So he looks at, for example, Old Testament passages, and we can think of these, no doubt, where God requisitions witnesses to his truth from the darkness of the nations and therefore from outside the community of the called and elect.

And you read about some of the major prophets of the Old Testament, right? They talk about how the nations, literally like Babylon, is a witness for God. God uses Babylon, all of its history, all of its events, to reveal himself, right?

And Babylon is not Israel, right? It's not the religious community that God has gathered, right? So he said, look, God's revealing things about himself through the nations. Christians need to be careful to issue an a priori dismissal of the fact that God might certainly be able to do this, but that he might indeed do this.

He said, if we dismiss this possibility, we run the risk of a dangerous form of spiritual pride that is tantamount to pretending that we're atlas-carrying the world, not God.

And as he continues, just elaborating on where these things can pop up, God says that little lights can emerge in secular domains that are pure and absolute. They can emerge among pagan peoples, and Barth notes the communist cultures of Eastern Europe at his time.

[28 : 21] He said, you know, these forms of God's word could emerge there, right? There's no church, there's no real worshipping community, nobody reads the Bible. God can reveal there in this way. No sphere of the world is ever totally abandoned by Christ.

Man may deny God, but God will not deny man. That's what he says. God will continue to reveal, and can reveal on even places like that. in all of these spheres, Christ can speak.

He can speak in unexpected ways, or you might say, I should say, to put the phrasing more carefully, he can speak in unexpected times, in unexpected forms, apart from the chief authorized communication of God, which is scripture and outside the church.

you can expect, therefore, to hear God in places that aren't Christianized. You could hear God, for example, Bart says, you could encounter God in the context of Buddhism.

Christ can self-reveal there. But the Christ that might reveal in Buddhism is the Christ that is known most clearly in the New Testament. That's the key thing. Now, how do you discern?

[29 : 47] How do you recognize these things? He has something to say. I wish he had said more to be quite honest. But he offers a few basic essential criteria.

Little lights are not self- validating. There is a place for discernment therein. So, the first point, and this is hardly a surprise, is that a little light must be in agreement with the revelation of God in Scripture.

It can't contradict it. It will not disturb or disrupt God's prior revelation through Jesus Christ and through Scripture. Right? Rather, Bart says, it will brighten it in a new way.

It will brighten it in a new way. Little lights are subordinate to Christ. They're not opposed to Christ. You should see some harmony. So, you shouldn't expect a lot of novelty in little lights.

Bart is not a monist. He's not expecting the spirit to bring some new revelation to the church that contradicts what God has already said about who he is and what he's up to through Jesus Christ. So, a little light is not innovative in that sense.

[31 : 01] It's not bringing something new and different. It's brightening something that God has already said is making it more concrete, personal, and relevant. to human beings at given moments. Bart also says that little light should be judged and discerned in light of Christian dogma and Christian confessions.

Like the creeds, for example, you shouldn't expect contradiction there either. He says the secondary authority of the fathers and the brethren is not to be neglected. That's what he's referring to, the kind of classical Christian theology and its convictions.

And then he says this, little light should not lead away from, but actually should lead one more deeply into the communio sanctorum, the community of saints.

That's their function, again, to build up faith, to build up one's identity and security as part of God's people. Now, as he draws his remarks here to a close, he makes several further comments that are important to note.

he says that little light should not, he's further focusing in on what a little light is brightening.

[32 : 09] What does it mean when it brightens God's prior revelation? Here he says a little light is something that exists in correspondence to what Barth calls the core nature of the Christian gospel. And he says the gospel, for example, is about liberation, spiritual liberation.

Barth's not a liberation theologian, right? Spiritual Liberation. And he says a little light should therefore it should serve some function in kind of promoting the spiritual liberation with which the gospel is concerned.

Little lights should also exhibit, they should reflect the pattern of judgment and grace that is at play in the gospel, right? The gospels, it is a word of grace, but you might say it's also a word of disruptive grace because it judges certain aspects of human existence and identity apart from God.

It calls that idolatry, right? So all these types of themes in the gospel should be bound up with the little lights and what they're revealing.

They should reflect the core themes of the gospel. This is just Barth's way of saying a little light is not going to reveal something different from what we know about God and Jesus Christ.

[33 : 18] It's going to brighten that, it's going to personalize that, apply it. But at the same time, it is a revelation of God that comes not just from reading your Bible, not just from hearing the Bible preached. You can see he's being very careful to kind of how he construes what this is so as to avoid sliding into some form of heresy or being misunderstood.

In the last breath, Barth reminds that little lights, and this is important, they have what he calls a limited and local quality. So they're not revelations of God that have universal applicability, that speak a word for all Christians throughout all times at all parts of the world.

They're limited and local. It's God revealing himself in a way to brighten the truth of the gospel at a particular moment in time for a particular group of people or for a particular person. So they're not universal.

And because they're not universal, we can never say that they have the type of authority, that scripture has. Scripture is the norm which sets the norm for the church's theology, but the little lights don't do that.

Again, to put it in his own words, little lights function to elucidate God's word at a particular time and situation, confirming in the deepest sense by helping to make it sure and concretely evident and certain.

[34 : 47] I think the English is kind of choppy because the German was kind of long, but you get the point of what he's saying, right? This is good, right? We need this. That's why I think that's what's beautiful about this, right?

We need this. I mean, we welcome all the confirmation, the personalized application of the gospel into our lives that God might bring. them. Bart himself talks a little bit about, he's hesitant to give examples.

People always want examples. Bart never gives as many examples as people want. And he does that for a reason. I think he probably has some in his mind, but his aim in discussing all of this is to affirm Christ's capacity, God's capacity to speak and reveal himself apart from church and scripture if he wants to.

That's his goal, right? When you think of God, don't ever think that he can't do that. He can and he does, and we call this little light. And Bart thinks if he gives too many examples, then people will focus on the examples and not the point.

So that's why he thinks he doesn't want his illustrations to become the object. Everyone says, oh, this is what it means, and so then you go and look for a little light as Bart discerned it, because that maybe was for Bart or for that moment in time and not for hours.

[36 : 05] So that's why he's cautious to do that. But he does give a few. He talks about the music of Mozart. I don't know exactly what he meant by that, but he does talk about the music of Mozart as something that God might use to reveal himself.

You know, Bart loved Mozart. He wrote a biography of Mozart. He believed that Mozart was living proof that God still does miracles. works. He talks about even the work of some of his theological nemeses, like Forbach and Overbeck, people who were opposed to him, but he said, God even can reveal himself through their work.

Yeah, I'm sure they took offense to that. God is not revealing through our work. We are discrediting God through our work. He talks about the fact that God, the God of the gospel might reveal himself through scientific discoveries, artistic intuitions, and even political sensibilities.

Again, he stays quite general here. I don't want to stay as general. This is something that's given to kind of orient us towards listening to God and eavesdropping in the world.

So I want to try to give a few examples. I offer these in a very provisional way. So I want to give a few examples of things that could potentially be little lights, ways that God reveals himself.

[37 : 31] And I think that they line up with the criteria that Bart lays out in the sense of their inconformity with God's revelation in the gospel. They reflect the themes of judgment and grace that are part of Christian life and Christian salvation.

So let me give you a few examples. One is a story I heard a few years ago about a guy called John Harrison. His story is told in a book that was written maybe ten years ago called Longitude, which was then turned into a fantastic film by the BBC.

John Harrison surmounted what historians have called the greatest scientific challenge of his era. Before his breakthrough, the invention of a marine chronometer.

Before that breakthrough, before his invention, it was impossible for ships to identify their longitude at sea. crash. Lots of soldiers died especially in the army, naval ships for the British Navy.

So to incentivize a remedy for that terrible state of affairs and losses, the British government established a big prize. They said they would dole out quite a pile of cash, 20,000 pounds at that time.

[38 : 42] You can imagine how much that would be today, about a million dollars today. To anyone who could devise consistently, means for gauging longitude while at sea on a ship.

So Harrison decided to take up the challenge. He was a carpenter from the lower classes in Britain at that time. He threw his head into the ring and his proposed solution was a clock that would keep steady time at sea.

But that required a breakthrough because up until that point, the only clocks were pendulum clocks and that doesn't work on a boat. Now his proposal to invent a clock, which in this case is called a marine chronometer, was quite different from the other proposals that were on the table.

And it was seen as the least impressive option. It was less erudite and sophisticated and accomplished than the other options on the table based on the sensibilities of that time.

Harrison labored at this task for about 50 years. And along the way he received, and this comes out very clear in the novel and the film, an embarrassing amount of belittlement from the good and the great of England at that time who wielded the scepters of power in the Royal Academy and throughout the other leading scientific guilds of Britain at that time.

[40 : 06] They could not abide the thought that a lowly, uneducated carpenter could win the longitude prize and save the lives of thousands.

But his chronometer outshone all the other submissions and his tool eventually achieved the desired result. I've seen all of them there at the Royal Observatory in Greenwich, outside of London.

Now Harrison was never actually honored with the prize itself. Institutional snobbery had the day, but he did eventually receive the generous cash award after the king intervened.

to say, this is the guy who got it right. Pay him. Honor him. Because I honor him. I think that the Harrison story might be a little light to the gospel.

It's a secular parable that reveals something about the nature of God in Christ. One has but to think of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1. God uses the weak and the lowly of the world to shame the strong.

[41 : 13] I think when Harrison saga is viewed in light of Christ, it emerges as a little light which points to a great truth about the way God operates for our salvation with all the surprise and shock and upset that that elicits in the world as it normally operates.

So that's one example perhaps. Another example comes from the wife of George Hunsinger who is one of the great scholars of our days at Princeton and his wife's a counselor and she's familiar with Bart Stalt and she's written a book on parenting and she talks about the doctrine of little lights in the context of her book on parenting and she says that God might use parents as little lights.

Within the divine economy God might commandeer parents at the level of secondary objectivity to be parables of the grace of God for their children.

Through normal psychological processes children in relation to their parents might internalize an unconscious picture of God that is not entirely dissimilar to the one that we find in the New Testament.

That doesn't always happen we know but it can happen and God can use parents like that and the Bible suggests that he would like to use parents like that. When parents act as wise and loving while yet abiding in a posture of power and authority they mirror the nature of God's grace and the mode of his relationship with humanity and in this way they could stand as little lights conveying some genuine truth about the way God relates to us to their children.

[42 : 54] Now in that case Hunsinger suggests that Bart's inviting us to think about something that's very familiar in a very different way. He says we would tend to explain this in terms of parental intentionality and so forth.

Bart says actually what we need to see is that God is using the parents for this purpose to reveal something about the way he is. And again that that aligns with what we know about God from scripture and from the gospel.

Another one I took from a film I thought of this this morning I thought I would come and share it. I actually have a screenplay from Fisher King. Who's seen Fisher King? I think there may be a little light in this one.

Let me read you this excerpt from the screenplay here. Fisher King stars Robin Williams and at a certain point he plays a guy called Perry and then he's romantically pursuing a girl called Lydia.

This is a conversation they have in that film. So they've gone on a date. It's been a really nice evening. They come back. They're at the front door of Lydia's apartment and this is what Lydia says.

[44 : 06] This is beautiful. I think you're a little attracted to me. I've had to edit this by the way. If you've seen the movie you'll understand. I'm going to leave some things out. I think you're a little bit attracted to me and you're probably going to want to come upstairs for some coffee and to talk and to get to know each other and then we'll exchange phone numbers and you'll leave and you'll never call.

And I'll go to work. And I'll feel good for the first hour and then ever so slowly I'll turn into a piece of dirt because you don't call.

I don't even know why I'm putting myself through this. It was really nice to meet you. Good night. And Perry says, excuse me, wait a minute, wait, wait, wait a minute, excuse me. I have a confession to make.

I have a confession to make to you Lydia. She says, what, you're married? No. You're divorced? No. You have a terminal illness? No. Please stop this. I'm in love with you.

That's what I want to say to you, Lydia. And not just from tonight. I've known you for a long time. I know that you come out from work every day and you fight your way out that door and you get pushed back in and you come back out again.

[45 : 21] This is in New York City. I walk behind you on your way to lunch. If it's a good day, you stop and get that romance. Novel at the store. I know on Wednesdays you go to the dim sung parlor and I know that you get a jawbreaker before you go back to work.

I also know that you hate your job and that you don't have many friends and that sometimes you feel uncoordinated and you don't feel as wonderful as everyone else seems to feel. You feel alone and separate as you feel that you are.

But I love you. I love you and I think you're the greatest thing since Spice Racks. And I'll be knocked out if I could just have that first kiss and I won't be distant and I'll always call if you'll let me.

And Lydia looks at him and she says, you're real? Now, the gospel says that we are known and loved.

Not just loved, but fully known and loved. J.R. Packer has a great quote about this. I put it on Facebook sometimes. It's from one of your books. There's nothing that God will ever discover about us that will change his mind because we're fully known.

[46 : 38] I think that little excerpt from that film might be a little parable because that is reinforcing a core truth of the gospel right there in a way that makes it more relative and profound and concrete in our lives.

So perhaps God used, perhaps it wasn't just the director and the production company that used Fisher King to make money. Perhaps God used it also to make people wealthy. And then last thing, the last little example, I just watched Justice Scalia died, U.S.

Supreme Court of Justice, last week. And I watched a 60 Minutes program that was made with him 20 years ago now, but just learning a bit about his life.

He was, to say the least, very vigorous in his legal opinions. He held to his guns. He wasn't scared to disagree and to debate.

he was ferociously disliked by a lot of people in the United States. But they interviewed his colleagues on this program, including someone who's at the opposite end of the jurisprudence spectrum, Justice Ginsburg.

[47 : 52] And what came through there was that despite antithetical legal philosophies, he was highly admired by his colleagues who were also his adversaries in terms of jurisprudence.

In fact, he had personal friendships with them. They said they had no animosity towards him, even if they did feel exasperated with him at times. And in talking about his M.O.

as a human, he's a Christian by the way, he talks about the absolute necessity of being able to differentiate ideas from people and to disagree with ideas, but to love people.

And I wonder if his life, at least what I heard there, might also be a bit of a parable for the nature of God's grace, to differentiate certain ideas, conceptions, ways of operating that are common to human culture and society, which really don't fit well into the kingdom of God, but to love the people who hold them anyway.

Barth always says that the word of God, the gospel, contains a no and a yes. God's no to the sinful condition of humanity, but God's yes to humanity.

[49 : 10] And that yes is given to liberate us from that. So therefore, the little light should reflect that aspect of the gospel, the no and the yes. The no and the yes. So a few examples, again, I'll offer those in a very provisional way.

I think little lights always have to be held provisionally, right? But what I would affirm is that God is speaking through events and people and screenplays and lives and perhaps even you to reveal himself.

So holding that in mind, I just want to comment in closing briefly on a few of the benefits that come out of this. But what he's done is given us a theological account of how all this is possible and how it might work and what it needs to be, what the requirement for veracity is.

So I think the ongoing presence of God's revelation through little lights can potentially establish a bridge for interreligious dialogue, right?

There are some Christians who look at all other religions and say God is not there, right? The God that we know is not there. Well, maybe he is, right?

[50 : 16] So this is not religious pluralism, right? But it is finding a theological basis for interreligious dialogue that is yet faithfully Christian, right?

And I wonder, I mean, I don't know what the potential ramifications of that could be, but I see that as a possibility. You know, perhaps we think of other, Christ can be seen not merely just to negate all other religions, right, but actually to be present in them and even their basis in consummation, but that is Jesus Christ who is.

Yeah. Secondly, I think it holds promise in the realm of our devotional life and pastoral life. Here we want to think about how this, doctrine impacts the attitudes, expectations, sensibilities of the church, of us, of Christians.

I think it offers several gifts for the work of discipleship. First, it's a doctrine that instills humility, epistemological humility, you might say.

humility that combats that tendency for Christians to think that they've got the corner market on God, and that God only speaks here, in this book, which is in our hands and under our control, or that God only speaks in our churches.

[51 : 34] This doctrine says, well, of course God speaks loud and clear there and in the church, but that's not the only place God speaks. It's not the only place the God of the Bible, the God known in Jesus Christ speaks, right?

He speaks other places too, right? So, you don't control God, right? You don't control when God reveals and how he does it. God can work through the church, and I think we can safely say that God's preferred mode of extending salvation is through the local church, but God can also work outside of and apart from and even in spite of the church.

So, a bit of epistemological humility there. And then I think too, pastorally, it's a doctrine that should lead us to be open and receptive to God's work to bring spiritual vitality into our lives through encounters with him that go just beyond what we hear in a sermon or what we read in scripture, but actually learning to expect to see God, the word of God manifest in the events of everyday life, the people we encounter, the ordinary activities of our time, even the tides of culture, the scientific discoveries of the day.

If we don't have that expectation, our sight might be impaired. But sometimes you don't see things if you're not looking for them. And the struggle to persevere in the faith is a tough struggle at times, so we welcome all the help that God would give us.

We welcome the possibility that God would use our lives as little lights in certain ways, just like you might use parents for children in that way. And the fact that God might use the events and people of our lives to confirm the core truths of the gospel in ways that are more concrete, relevant, specific to our circumstances in life.

[53 : 21] So, you know, I dare say in this sense, Barth seems to be embracing the pietism which he famously critiqued in his earlier years. You know, is Barth even kind of sensitive to the charismatic sensitivity to God's communication and sort of other layers and levels of human experience.

We know that Barth would be cautious about over-spiritualizing the events of life, but this doctrine suggests that we should also be cautious about under-spiritualizing the events of life and how God might reveal in these ways.

His affirmation of little lights is a warning against approaching and doing Christian life in a way that sometimes functionally counts as deism, you might say.

God is present and active. That's the declaration of Pentecost. And this doctrine reminds us that Christ envelops the world like the white lights of a Christmas tree.

So, may our eyes perceive and may our ears hear. I'll leave it at that. I can do, at last, I can do two questions and I've got a Zoom I'm baptizing four people in 45 minutes.

[54 : 46] Anyway, yes, sir, we've got those two. Actually, I've got one comment and two questions. Okay. That's right there. Yes. Comment on this. Mozart was perfect, almost perfect, but even place, not like movie, that he wrote, they wrote his first script and that was perfect.

He actually went back and do a lot of edits, so we were especially in his comments. Are you talking about Amadeus? Yes, that was the comment. Okay. Question one is, the church preaching as the word of God, what is Bar's view about God's word preached ex-cathedra?

And number two, question two is, Saul consulting or trying to call him Samuel through the sorcerer.

Does Barth see that as, I see Samuel there as the devil or a big light in which God really sent Samuel through the sorcerer?

I can't answer the second question at all. I don't know. And I don't know, I don't think the notion of ex-cathedra, as I gather as it's used in the Roman Catholic Church, would be relevant here at all because Barth was vigorously opposed to that concept and its theological deployment.

[56 : 19] When you mentioned about romanticism, I thought of it just as mainly looking back to the past, like Friedrich Schleimheik or the romantic label, but you're tying up romanticism can lead to a liberalism and a compromising is the way you interpreted the word.

That's interesting to me. Yeah, and the romanticism is another one of those words that has several meanings depending on the context in which it's used. So there's romantic music, there's romantic art. I'm using it more in terms of a philosophy is not right because I think it would resist that type of label on it, but an orientation towards knowing kind of big truth that's highly experiential, highly subjective and personal.

Okay, one more. Yes, sir. I would like for you to talk about Karl Barth as a person and I'm thinking that there seems to be a kind of genetic development, a life situation and you certainly established the Nazi context for the opposition to natural theology, but I don't have the sense of the corresponding life situation for what I would regard as a mediation of a fairly one-sided view of what ultimately is a paradox.

Okay, I'll comment briefly on that. In terms of the life situation in which this thought emerged, I don't know that yet. I hope to know it soon though, but I haven't had time yet.

Theologically though, this doctrine is very much attuned to one of the major pillars of Barth's entire dogmatic project. Dogmatic used technically there, not in the negative sense.

[58 : 20] Those people are so dogmatic. That's not what I mean. He's referring to Christian doctrine. That is his commitment to the freedom of God. The freedom of God.

God is never something that the church controls. Sometimes the ways that the church controls God can be very subtle. For example, we say God only speaks in scripture and he can't speak anywhere else.

I know people who actually say that and think that and Barth's really pushing against that because he says that puts you above God. So the freedom of God is a big God is and it's not at all to say that Barth doesn't think that scripture is the norm for the church and the chief locus of God.

He's not saying that at all and his opponents misconstrue him in that way. He's fighting a different battle. Can you at least timeline the little light's doctrine? Yeah, that's in 4.3 so towards the end, probably in the 50s I guess is when that develops.

I mean, it's clearly his examples refer to the communist envelopment of Eastern Europe, so it's in that time. Giving hope by the reminder that God can reveal in that context even if the church has been stamped on.

[59 : 38] Roger is a pastor and so we can't disrupt it's good words to me. Let me just say our former pastor, the late Harry Robinson, I remember in a sermon pulled up, he said in his car and there was a car in front of him and there was a bumper sticker that said think globally, act locally.

And he's just, he started to say, I've heard that somewhere. Love God, love your neighbor. It was a lesser life. So there you go.

But you're a pastor, I interrupted our thanks and thank you, must come back again, more Karl Barth. How many volumes? 14? 14, yeah. You just started reading more.

So thank you very much. Thank you. As always, if you have questions about anything you want to follow up, this talk was probably more theologically abstract than the last one, so it's more to digest.

I'm still digesting it, but I find it a fascinating doctrine. I think it brings some very important affirmations. So email me if you have questions. We can continue the dialogue there.