

Preface

“... the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

—COLOSSIANS 1:26–27¹

HOW CLEARLY I RECALL the feeling when I first learned that the doctrine of the Trinity was not found in Scripture. It was a mix of bewilderment and shame that I had been a Christian for some twenty-five years yet never knew this. A shadow of mild betrayal: Why had no one ever told me? A sense of uncertainty: What do I do now? I am a disciple of Jesus Christ who ardently pursues truth (I was in graduate school at the time), and I have believed something that is *not in the Bible*? If I have been so mistaken for so long about this, what else do I believe that isn't actually biblical?

And that wasn't the only discovery I made during that study stint. I also discovered theology. I was thirty years old, had been going to church since I was five, had been a cross-cultural missionary for six years, and it was only in a systematics module that I came to discover theology. I finally had a language to explore and express my faith. Oh, happy day!

My story is not the point of this book but this episode serves to illustrate the significance of the *doing* of theology. I do not mean the sitting in class and writing papers, but rather the ancient task of moving from the text of Old and New Testaments and into explication and application of revelation to faith and life. This “how” of theology is my preoccupation in the pages that follow. *How* do we engage Scripture according to its own

1. All Bible citations are from The Holy Bible (English Standard Version).

measure, in terms that necessarily go beyond its own language, context, and terminology but still remain faithful to God's self-unveiling in it? *How* do we explicate the Christian faith in such a way that it makes transformative sense to every person who encounters it? *How* do we submit ourselves as theologians, pastors, scholars, parents, teachers, learners to its ancient wisdom in ways that impact twenty-first century life in a revolutionary manner?

My purpose in the following pages is to explore and answer these and other questions through the lens of twentieth century theologian Emil Brunner. In a first instance I seek to hear Brunner on his own terms, in order to distill the pattern he establishes for believing thinking, teaching, and preaching. As a result of this listening I then aim to outline the pattern of his work—his methodology. My conclusion can be summed up thusly: Emil Brunner's theology is thoroughly biblical (if non-biblicist), warmly pastoral, carefully intellectual, and insistently Christocentric, offering an exposition of the Christian faith that is truly worth our time. The "how" of his theology deserves renewed attention, as does a renewed look at the broader content of his work from this angle.

Brunner has influenced significantly my own theological work over the past decade. When I recently realized this fact, I had a moment of grave concern. Brunner has been out of fashion for some decades in the UK and this is where I happily live and work. Would I find any allies, or would I be defining myself as outdated and irrelevant for the rest of my career? Furthermore, Brunner for much longer has been branded a liberal of sorts by certain evangelical scholars, in the United States in particular, and my faith-heritage is rooted in such a context in New England where I was raised. Would I be alienating myself forever from loved and valued dialogue partners by writing about a man who has been so censured? You can perhaps understand my anxieties about the impact—of the impact—of Brunner on my own thinking, praying, and doing of theology. If you undertake to engage with this book, I hope you too will be at the least intrigued about what has been neglected in recent decades in this disciple of Jesus Christ from Zurich. I trust that you will find something of his work that draws you closer in heart and mind to the unveiling of God's glory in Christ . . . and the hope of that glory in us.