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# Introduction

"Real theology is not only for experts, but it is for all to whom religious questions are also problems for thought."

—Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, 12



## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK?

One cannot explore the landscape of theology for too long before discovering a field surrounding the topic of methodology that has been growing for some decades. The twentieth century Swiss theologian Emil Brunner is of special interest on this subject, in particular, his view of the theological task and the boundaries that he places on the work of dogmatics. His perspective on the "how" of theology merits serious attention, although his theological method has yet to receive critical assessment in the same way that the thought of some of his contemporaries has. In this light, the purpose of this book is to state the nature of and the limits to theological inquiry established by Emil Brunner and, further, to illustrate the claim that his approach deserves careful consideration for theology today.

The dearth of recent investigative work on Brunner, with the notable exception of Alister McGrath's *Emil Brunner: A Reappraisal*, means that

substantial primary source study must be done before evaluation can be proposed or conclusions drawn. Because my goal is to outline Brunner's methodology, within that narrow scope I am most concerned with his mature thought. All of the primary sources considered here were penned during or after what might be called Brunner's eristic-dogmatic period (1928–1960), save two that were published one year before.[1]

The book unfolds in the following manner. Part I establishes Brunner's foundational conviction that theology is "believing thinking." In chapter 2 I start by establishing what we might call Brunner's methodological first principles. Brunner asserts that truth as encounter, reflected in the apostolic witness, defines the nature of and is the criterion for theological inquiry. God has revealed himself in the historic event of Jesus Christ and the apostles' testimony to this event is the seedbed in which we do our theological digging. Out of this earth theology grows from its roots of exegesis, catechesis, and polemics. All theological endeavors must emerge from and be consistent with the biblical narrative of the apostolic witness. The doctrine of the Trinity serves as our first case study for the purpose of testing Brunner's paradigm in his own work. Chapter 3 continues with further case studies as I survey Brunner's three-volume *Dogmatics*. Particular attention is lent to subjects such as the divine nature and will, the *imago Dei* and redemption, the church as *ekklesia*, and the role of faith. Because of Brunner's emphasis on the historical event of Jesus Christ, a few words must be said about both the demythologizing task and the place of *Heilsgeschichte*.

Part II focusses on the "bounded theology" that results from Brunner's schema. I expand the focus in chapter 4 beyond *Dogmatics* to other published works. To what extent does Brunner respect the boundaries he establishes, and how effectively is he able to deal with the heart of the Christian faith in so doing? The theme of revelation dominates this chapter and illuminates the particular shape and nature of God's self-communication, as well as Brunner's critical rejection of the doctrine of infallibility. Chapter 5 carries on in the same direction but by a parallel route. Recalling the outline of Brunner's view of the doctrine of the Trinity in chapter 2, I turn to the

1. See Johnson, "Soteriology as a Function of Epistemology," 7–9. Johnson draws our attention to three periods: the predialectical (1914–1920), the dialectical (1921–1927), and the eristic-dogmatic. The last period is the context of this study, given that the works we will examine were written during this period or just after, with the exception of two that were penned in 1927, being *The Philosophy of Religion from the Standpoint of Protestant Theology* and *The Mediator*.

work of Karl Barth, Brunner's contemporary, and his own methodological approach to the same doctrine. Here we learn not only about Barth's methodology but also a bit more of the "why" and "how" of Brunner's approach, including his rejection of the virgin birth as dogma.

"Transformed being" is the focus of Part III. It builds on the first two parts of the book by exploring the *effect* that theology should have on the one's whole existence. To round out our understanding of personal encounter, I explore in chapter 6 the influence of Søren Kierkegaard on Brunner's understanding of truth.[2] Unsurprisingly for anyone who knows Kierkegaard's work, questions of truth, paradox, existence, and subjectivity are some of the themes explored. Finally, in chapter 7 I posit some concrete contributions to the life and work of the Christian theologian today. When theology is done in response to God's loving personal encounter with us, two things occur: transformation happens within the individual who responds in faith and submission to the Lordship of Christ, and empowered engagement with the church and the world follows. Without this kind of transformation, theology has not been effectively worked out in the Christian. Courageous, believing, and boundaried thinking is required.

## WHO WAS EMIL BRUNNER?

When compared with the raft of books and theses dedicated to the likes of Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Bultmann, only scant biographical details on Brunner have seen printed form. The following particulars are worth summarizing here.[3] The Zurich region was the place both of his birth in 1889 and of most of his education through his Doctor of Theology degree in 1913. The few years that followed found Brunner in various successive roles: as a language teacher in England; as a member of the Swiss militia; and as a vicar intern back in Zurich. In 1916 he took the pastorate of a small village congregation in Obstalden, and a year later he took a wife, Margrit Lauterburg. This rural pastorate would be his primary work until 1924, save a year of study at Union Theological Seminary in New York (1920).

2. It should be noted that the inclusion of both Kierkegaard and Barth springs from their immediate relevance to Brunner's thought and is undertaken for the elucidation gained by exploring their work alongside his.

3. A source which summarizes biographical information is Humphrey, *Brunner*, 15–20. A more comprehensive book published in 2006 is Jehle, *Emil Brunner*, and McGrath picks up on numerous points from Jehle in his own volume.

A significant move in 1924 ushered him to the University of Zurich, where he held the Chair of Systematic and Practical Theology until 1955. A second sojourn in the United States took place during these decades (1938–1939), this time as visiting professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. Brunner's later influence extended even further afield than North America, as he spent 1953–1955 in Tokyo, contributing to the fledging International Christian University and earning him the title of "missionary theologian."[4] Though suffering from measured physical limitation after a brain hemorrhage in 1955, Brunner remained an active theologian and churchman, continuing to publish books and articles until his death in 1966.

It is difficult to add to this thumbnail sketch an equally concise synopsis of the various factors contributing to his personal and theological development, including the historical era in which Brunner and his colleagues lived and worked.[5] It is evident from a variety of factors throughout his life that Brunner was made sensitive to, and remained concerned about, the crossroads between faith and life, between the gospel and what it means to be human, between the church and culture. Early influences include Hermann Kutter, Christoph Blumhardt, and Leonhard Ragaz who encouraged his family's engagement in the Religious Socialist Movement, awakening Brunner to the struggle of many for social justice. Alongside this sociological formation, Brunner identifies an internal "search for a scientifically satisfying formulation of my faith," for which he chose Kant and Husserl as his guides. It was his questions about the reality and certainty of God, however, that led him to immerse himself in Luther and Kierkegaard, two figures who feature time and again throughout his writings.[6]

It is not only intellectual questions that influenced his concern for the application of the Christian faith, though. During the years of his professional life, Brunner's travels affected his theology as much as did his pastoral and teaching work in Switzerland. He reflects that, amidst the variety of experiences during his career, "scholarly work in theological and philosophical areas was and still is strictly subordinated to the proclamation of the Gospel . . . The question of the relation of faith to philosophy was and still is a fascinating question for me but, nevertheless, basically a secondary problem. I was and am above all a preacher of the Good News."[7]

4. See editorial "Emil Brunner and the Wide-open Spaces," 255.
5. See Burnier, "Protestant Theology in Wartime Switzerland."
6. Kegley and Bretall, eds., *Theology of Brunner*, 4–11.
7. Ibid., 8.

His passion for people to grasp the gospel as much with their lives as with their minds led him to a series of questions that shaped his writings. The first conclusion he came to about the problem of "the proclamation of the Gospel in a secularized society and to the peoples of the world" was one of anthropology and apologetics. This investigation led to a second priority in his thinking, "namely a reformulation of the biblical concept of truth . . . Since then, all of my work in dogmatics has been done in the light of this aspect: the God who communicates himself." Lest we get the wrong idea, however, Brunner regards his apologetic concern as secondary to the main task of theology, which he describes as "the struggle for the right understanding of faith in Christ."[8] It is this struggle, above any other, that dominates the focus of the following pages.

## WHY STUDY BRUNNER?

"It is not unusual in any field of scholarship to find a true giant overshadowed by the colossi. Emil Brunner's stature and influence in twentieth century theology would be indisputable were it not for Barth and Bultmann who overshadowed him."[9] In this way Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson begin their introduction to the man and thought of Emil Brunner. It is not only in comparison with other recent theologians that the lack of material on Brunner is evidenced; the texts dedicated solely to his theology are few in number, whereas his contemporaries such as Barth and Bonhoeffer, and subsequent theologians the likes of Moltmann and Pannenberg, are thoroughly studied still. McKim identifies a different reason for Brunner's obscurity. He suggests that "Brunner's vanishing resulted, at least in part, from his effort to communicate effectively the ancient faith to modern Western society. In that attempt, Brunner tried to remain faithful to the biblical witness while simultaneously recognizing the sea of change that had occurred at the Enlightenment. His efforts often placed him in the theological center, where there is precious little room in contemporary Protestant thought."[10]

Given the absence of recent attention, why is the present project either necessary or beneficial? Firstly, it is profitable because Brunner still is afforded consistent, if passing, mention in introductory texts to modern theology. Schwarz's 2005 masterpiece is one such example in which he

8. Ibid., 11–15.
9. Grenz and Olson, *Twentieth-century Theology,* 77–78.
10. McKim, "Brunner the Ecumenist," 91.

draws attention to the mixed geographical attraction that Brunner held. "Since Barth's influence on the European continent was so overwhelming, however, Brunner's more dialogical approach was more appreciated in the British Isles and above all in Asia and America,"[11] where his voice is still heard in both Reformed and modern theology studies. The fact that he was more popular in American circles and that his influence is still perceptible in Japanese theology[12] indicates Brunner's commitment to live the personal encounter of faith about which he writes, even at the potential cost of prestige in his homeland.

McEnhill and Newlands comment that although Brunner's work has faded into the background since his death, the impact of his work continues to be acknowledged. Sometimes it is "as a footnote in the development of dialectical theology or as a useful foil in explaining Barth's rejection of natural theology," but "this was not always so; Brunner received a far earlier and far wider reception in the English-speaking world than Barth. However, he has since suffered considerably in comparison with Barth who is generally thought to be more creative, more radical and more insightful. All this may be true but it is to be hoped that Brunner's more open and apologetic style, along with his avowal of certain key themes of Reformed theology that Barth may have too readily neglected, will one day merit a return to prominence for this important thinker."[13] In my view, that day is near.

This brings us to a second reason Brunner's work merits study: to be heard on his own terms, not only in comparison with his Basel counterpart. It is undeniable that "Brunner made his own distinctive contribution to the break with nineteenth century liberalism that dialectical theology represented."[14] As a result, it is not only possible but also valuable to appraise Brunner's work for itself, without having to pit him against Barth or Barth against him. Despite, or perhaps because of, their differences, both men have something significant to bring to the theological table, and to disregard Brunner because of Barth's uncommon stature is to be unnecessarily

11. Schwarz, *Theology in a Global Context*, 316. Hebblethwaite concurs, suggesting that Brunner was appreciated as "more balanced" than some of his colleagues: Hebblethwaite, *The Christian Hope*, 136.

12. Personal correspondence with Dr. Nozomu Miyahira, a Japanese theologian from Seinan Gakuin University in southwest Japan, yields a list of sources that references this claim (25 February 2009).

13. McEnhill and Newlands, *Fifty Key Christian Thinkers*, 84.

14. Ibid., 80.

short-sighted. As Jewett states, "Though he has not written so voluminously as his compatriot, Karl Barth, he has shown a versatility, amplitude, and balance of thought not found in the man at Basel."[15] Brunner's impact on twentieth century theology was important, and neo-orthodoxy, especially in its Anglo-Saxon expression, was due in large part to Brunner's work of translation and propagation. Nelson goes as far as to say, "One could safely risk the generalization . . . that in the years 1935–55 no single theologian had more influence upon British and American Protestant ministers and teachers."[16] Reymond's view extends to the contemporary context when he writes, "a knowledge of Brunner's basic theological thought is absolutely essential . . . to an intelligent understanding of the contemporary theological scene in America for . . . [his ideas] have done much to determine the direction of American theology today."[17]

Still and all it must be asked, does the absence of more recent, focused study of Brunner mean that his relative obscurity is deserved and that he is side-lined in modern theology for the good reason that he is just not worth studying? This is certainly one possible interpretation of the data. It is equally possible, however, that Grenz and Olson are correct in their assessment and that Brunner truly is a giant worthy of deliberation. Indeed, that is a premise of this book, that he remains valuable into the twenty-first century. In this I share McGrath's view: "Brunner needs to be reconsidered and rehabilitated—not in his totality, but certainly in relation to some of his methods and approaches, which retain validity and significance, especially in the theological and cultural climate which has developed in the west in the twenty-first century."[18] My proposition is not that Brunner offers a methodology to end all methodologies, but that his understanding of the nature and limits of theological inquiry deserves to be heard more clearly than it has been and that it remains relevant to today's theological task. We will see that his approach is not entirely unique, for commonalities with other historical and twentieth century theologians are numerous. If, however, theology at its best is conversation, then Brunner's voice is worth listening to, either again or for the first time.

15. Jewett, *Brunner's Concept of Revelation*, 139.

16. Nelson, "The Final Encounter," 486. See also Dorrien, *Barthian Revolt*, particularly 1–10, 106–19. McGrath concurs: *Reappraisal*, 177.

17. Reymond, *Contending for the Faith*, 210.

18. McGrath, *Reappraisal*, 226.