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The Task of Dogmatic Theology

"The God of the Bible is a God who speaks, and the Word of the Bible is the Word of this God."

—Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, 31

Theology for Brunner, first and foremost, is believing thinking. Faith is both preliminary and simultaneous to knowing and speaking about God. How does a modern Swiss-German theologian arrive at such a conclusion in a post war to end all wars world? How does theology retain any shred of legitimacy or trustworthiness at all? In what way can theologians remain optimistic about their task when so much has gone so wrong, and that on a Christian continent? With this context in mind, the purpose of this chapter is to offer an overview of Emil Brunner's approach to the task of dogmatic theology during his as the eristic-dogmatic period (1928–1960). Central to this task is to identify and outline his key paradigms and defining terms that have significant influence on the method and content of his work. As McGrath notes, the core elements of Brunner's theology were in place by 1929 so this time frame will allow us to evaluate how his method works itself out in cooperation with his theology.[1]

1. McGrath, *Reappraisal*, 72.

PART ONE: BRUNNER'S METHODOLOGY OUTLINED

The Divine–Human Encounter is a compilation of lectures that Brunner delivered at the University of Uppsala, Sweden, in 1937 on the subject of the Christian understanding of truth.[2] Succinct yet incisive, it serves as a valuable introduction to the motivation that lies behind Brunner's methodology by offering insight into the context guiding Brunner's explanation of Christian knowledge of God. His purpose in this particular study is two-fold: one, to show the compromising and pervasive impact that the object-subject antithesis has had on Christian faith; two, to redefine truth according to a biblical conception and to indicate its implications for theology. For the purpose of dogmatics he rephrases the age-old question, What is truth and how do we come to know it? as How is knowing related to being? Let it be clear at the outset that Brunner is not jettisoning the object-subject correlation in all areas of truth-seeking; quite the contrary. His particular focus is the work of theology and the proclamation of God's word that, given the nature of revelation, requires a unique approach. As McGrath observes, these lectures "represent one of the most significant attempts to develop a theological understanding of the relationship of revelation and faith which avoids the problematic notions of 'subject' and 'object' arising from the Enlightenment, particularly in relation to the Kantian tradition. Yet they also provide an understanding of human identity as a 'Thou'—rather than an 'It'—which resists commodificationist and collectivist reductions of human individuality."[3]

Truth as Encounter

Illustrating the impact of the object-subject antithesis on Christianity can be done effectively in an historical synopsis. As Brunner represents it, the Christian community in its early years was irreversibly influenced by the Greek philosophical worldview as it sought to understand, teach, and convert others to the gospel. As time distanced the church from the historical event of Jesus Christ, God's definitive self-revelation in the God-man lost its decisiveness for faith. The perception of God's word was altered as a result. It became popular belief, says Brunner, that "the divine revelation

2. The lectures are alternatively known under a subsequent publication titled *Truth as Encounter*.

3. McGrath, *Reappraisal*, 160–61.

in the Bible had to do with the communication of those doctrinal truths which were inaccessible by themselves to human reason; and correspondingly that faith consisted in holding these supernaturally revealed doctrines for truth."[4] This change, alongside the elevation of truth as something objectively obtained, resulted in the antithesis between so-called objective truth, expressed in the church's *Credo*, and faith's subjective acceptance of God's revelation (*credo*). This calamitous divorce between the truth of God's revelation and a faith response to it is what Brunner laments and seeks to rectify in his call to return to a biblical understanding of truth.

Brunner's survey of the impact of this antithesis on the church is as compelling as the story is tragic.[5] He contends that, by and large, the Christian community throughout the centuries has propagated, however unknowingly, this misrepresentation of the gospel. Pressed by the powers of history, ecclesial turmoil, and corrupt human nature, the church has swung between the poles of subjectivism and objectivism, with both extremes misconstruing the nature of truth and faith. Brunner highlights a notable exception to this flux in the Reformers, to whom he often returns in his writing. Sadly, however, the point at which the church had arrived by the nineteenth century was nothing short of the "subjective dissolution of theology," which he would inherit in his own day.[6]

Brunner and his contemporaries, therefore, found themselves no longer dealing with believing discourse about God's gracious interface with humankind in Christ but with a religion that judged belief in special revelation as *passé* and truth as stagnant and quantified. The church needed above all else a new foundation for its knowledge of the truth as the basis for its commission on earth—to know God and to make him known. This fresh source was not to be anything new at all, though; "the truth of the salvation and revelation clearly discoverable and available in the words of the Bible" was the original root to which to return.[7] The critical difference lay in the approach to truth, no longer as an object to be possessed but as the gift of God's active, personal self-communication.

Foundational to this shift is an altered understanding of revelation. With the Reformers, Brunner understands the divine self-communication

4. Brunner, *Encounter*, 12. Further discussion of the influence of Hellenism on Christianity is found in Brunner, "The Significance of the Old Testament," 247–49.

5. Brunner, *Encounter*, 14–29.

6. Ibid., 25.

7. Ibid., 20.

as both present tense and inextricably entwined with the historical event of Christ: "the Word of the living, present Spirit of God, wherewith the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ Himself, takes possession of our hearts and Himself makes His home there."[8] He maintains that the knowledge of faith is not an enterprise by which the knower possesses the thing known, but rather a process that transforms the knower. Here Brunner answers the question posed at the beginning of *The Divine–Human Encounter*: the relation of the knower to the known is personal encounter. In this light, Brunner's thesis "truth as encounter" becomes the only viable starting point for the particular kind of knowledge that dogmatics is concerned with, that of knowing God personally. His claim is a battle cry to twentieth century theology to bring the study of God back to its absolute subject.

How does truth as encounter differ from truth as defined by the object-subject antithesis, particularly as it pertains to dogmatics? The influence of the latter leads to a definition of faith as intellectual assent to fixed statements of "truth" established by the self-appointed authority of the church. Brunner insists that biblical faith is markedly different. It is belief in the risen Lord whom we know through personal relationship. As a result, truth as encounter is distinguished from the antithesis in that it is personal instead of objective, and it is active rather than static.

Brunner firstly emphasizes God's self-revelation as personal, as historical event, and as unique. Based on this, he traces the divine–human encounter in the following way. God first reveals himself to persons through Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, who discloses in human form the fullness of the divine being. Relationship is thereby established between the individual and God. To this divine communication the individual is invited to respond in obedience-in-trust (*pistis*), thus completing the encounter in fellowship. Scripture is replete with examples of such events between God and individuals, the quintessential encounters being those of the apostles with the risen Christ. This is the biblical description of faith that Brunner establishes as the foundation of theological inquiry.

Secondly, this decisive experience with God is what Brunner calls the event of *personal correspondence*. The specific connection between the event and knowledge that occurs therein is described thusly: "Knowledge and act, knowing and *happening*, are in this instance a single process. God communicates Himself in love: and this happens in the fullest sense only

8. Ibid.

when His love is known in responding love."[9] This is where Brunner arrives at a renewed conception of faith. Instead of passive assent to objective statements about God, faith becomes the positive participation in relationship with God through Christ, leading to transformation of the knower. What does Brunner's depiction of personal correspondence tell us about how we know God? Most importantly it affirms that God is the self-revealing God who initiates relationship with human beings. He communicates himself out of love for his creation, and the partnership created by his love impacts the human person who responds in faith. Otherwise stated, knowing occurs when human beings lovingly respond to God's revelation in the living dynamic of "I–Thou" interface.[10]

A further question immediately follows. What significance does this portrayal of truth have for the work of theological inquiry? Brunner explains that "we are beginning to suspect why in the Bible the word 'truth' appears in what is for us a strange context with the words 'doing' and 'becoming.' Faith, which appropriates God's self-revelation in His Word, is an event, an act and that a two-sided act—an act of God and an act of man. *An encounter takes place between God and man.*"[11] Truth, then, is personal encounter.

With good reason Brunner addresses the question of how such a first-person, divine–human relation could be possible if God is holy and humankind is permeated with sin. How does this understanding of truth as encounter relate to justification?[12] Brunner's response is singular: Jesus Christ. He explains at length how the person and work of Jesus in salvation history constitute God's self-revelation and effectuate humankind's reconciliation with its creator. In the person of Jesus Christ we encounter God and enjoy union with God. "God's quality of being Person, revealed in Jesus

9. Ibid., 45. God as love is indicative of his movement towards us, of his self-giving in revelation, his forgiveness and reconciliation, and the movement of the kingdom of God among us. See Brunner, *Word and World*, 50; Brunner, *Theology of Crisis*, 13, 11; Brunner, *Mediator*, 313.

10. Brunner, *Dogmatics II*, v. This reference to the "Copernican turning point" in philosophy by Ebner and Buber is brief in space but its influence is evident throughout Brunner's work. See also Brunner, *Word and World*, 64. McGrath also identifies this influence; see *Reappraisal*, 157–160. Hynson helpfully points out the correlation between Buber's use of the German for "meeting" or "encounter"—*Begegnung*—and Brunner's title for *Truth as Encounter* which turns on the same term—*Warheit als Begegnung* in "Theological Encounter: Brunner and Buber," 352.

11. Brunner, *Encounter*, 53.

12. Ibid., 56–75.

Christ, is itself of such a nature that it establishes fellowship. Being person [*Person-sein*] and being in fellowship [*In-Gemeinschaft-Sein*] are identical. Such is the Biblical concept of the Personality of God."[13] This is the constant message of Scripture, and it is the on-going experience of salvation for the people of God.

How does Brunner come to such a confident conclusion about how we know God? Divine revelation in Jesus Christ is again his answer. Before we explore the specifics of the incarnation attested to in the apostolic witness, though, Brunner's definition of the nature of theological inquiry must be addressed.

Encounter and Theological Inquiry

Brunner reminds his readers of the character of theology when he states, "dogmatic thinking is not only thinking about the Faith, it is believing thinking."[14] Because personal encounter with God cannot occur apart from faith, dogmatics—that is, believing reflection about that encounter—is only possible where intellectual inquiry about God transpires within the context of belief. It is clear from this that the proper context for theology is the community of faith. Dogmatics is the responsibility of the teaching church as it measures the experience of personal encounter against the witness of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ.

Dogmatics has three purposes, or roots, within the history of the church: exegesis, catechesis, and polemics.[15] Brunner identifies the first impetus as the need for careful interpretation of Scripture, which is required for Christian discipleship. Inherent in this responsibility is the need to hear what the whole Bible says about daily life and faith, a message that is not always readily accessible on a surface reading of individual texts. Catechesis, theology's second purpose, has as its goal the instruction of believers concerning the Christian confession of "Jesus is Lord," traditionally in preparation for baptism but also in doctrinal matters. Finally, as the church is faced with questions from within its own community, the work of theology must engage in a careful defense of the gospel to counter heresy and to return the

13. Ibid., 101.

14. Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 5.

15. Brunner offers a summary of these "roots" in *Encounter*, 11. A more thorough description is found in *Dogmatics I*, Prolegomena.

Christian community to the point of truth, that is, personal encounter with God through Christ.

The impact of this understanding of truth as personal encounter and theological inquiry as believing thinking about that encounter is that the knower enjoys fellowship with God through Christ as well as fellowship with others in the church. As real and tangible as this transformation is, Brunner reminds his readers that we do not yet know and see God in the fullness of his being. We only see in part what will one day be fully revealed when we encounter God face to face. The church labors in the interim to know God through the witness he has left in the written word. Brunner's view of Scripture is central to his methodology, so the relationship between encounter and the apostolic witness must be understood correctly. What is the nature of the scriptural kerygma, and how does it communicate God's self-revelation? How can dogmatics respect that nature in order to best hear God's word in it?

Brunner insists that absent in the biblical witness is a doctrine of God as he is in himself (*Gott-an-sich*), as well as a doctrine of man in himself (*Menschen-an-sich*). The biblical testimony instead speaks in terms of "God as the God who approaches man [*Gott-zum Menschen-hin*] and of man as the man who comes from God [*Menschen-von-Gott-her*]." In other words, God reveals himself only in the context of the warp and weft of human history. Such encounter "is not a timeless or static relation, arising from the world of ideas . . . [R]ather the relation is an event, and hence narration is the proper form to describe it . . . God 'steps' into the world, into relation with men: He deals with them, for them, and in a certain sense also against them; but He acts always in relation to them, and He always acts."[16]

Hence the nature of the biblical testimony as Brunner describes it possesses significant implications for how we do theology. His main contention is that the word of God is characterized by action and encounter, communicated in narrative and verbal language. God does not offer ontological statements about himself abstracted from experience. Instead, the people God addresses in the Old and New Testaments experience his work in their lives and only as a result do they affirm God's character as loving, just, jealous, and merciful. It is this dynamic quality of the written word that must be respected and imitated by theological inquiry, hence avoiding the compromise of objective and subjective religion while fostering the personal encounter of faith.

16. Brunner, *Encounter*, 31–32.

In contrast to mysticism, rationalism, and metaphysics, Brunner identifies the context of history as one of the defining features of Scripture that distinguishes it as special revelation. Regarding the event of Jesus Christ as the center and culmination of this salvation history, he observes, "God's relation to the world and to mankind is not something timeless, but it is action in history. Its historicity is as unconditional as the relation itself: hence this event is unique; it happened 'once for all.' Its uniqueness is as essential to this Good Friday event as the unconditioned will to Lordship and fellowship of that love which is disclosed in this unique event."[17]

The heart of the early church proclamation—the kerygma—is the reconciliation that God brings about through Jesus Christ. The risen Lord is preached as the good news that makes us his sons and daughters. For the apostles, the vision was not limited to their time, nor is it so limited for us. The church believes that the kingdom of God draws closer to its final consummation as the word is preached, as Christ's lordship is recognized, and as fellowship is established in the I–Thou encounter of faith.

Until Christ's return, though, we accept that our knowledge is partial, veiled, obscured by sin. For this reason Brunner points out that the revelation of God in Christ does not "*exhaust* the whole mystery of God . . . The Mystery of God stands at the beginning and at the end of revelation."[18] Mystery is not just the result of what we do not know; it is that which determines what we cannot know and should not seek to know. Mystery is, in fact, the first characteristic Brunner treats in his discussion of the divine nature and attributes, and it remains a significant element in his methodology, as we will continue to see.

Encounter and the Apostolic Witness

What could our encounter with the risen Lord possibly share in common with that of the apostles since Christ long ago ascended to the right hand of the Father? Brunner pinpoints in the New Testament the apostolic witness and the preaching of the Christian community as the particular means of divine revelation. The significance of the life, death, and resurrection of the God-man to which the law and prophets point cannot be overstated, for it is in this very event that personal correspondence occurs. It is the apostles' message that through Christ, in his very body, God reconciles rebellious

17. Ibid., 106–7.

18. Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 225–26.

humankind to himself, in love, lordship, and fellowship. Brunner argues that only those who responded to it in faith by believing that Jesus is the Son of God register the event of the resurrection. Their witness, above and beyond any others, is set apart because it is *believing* testimony.

As such the apostolic witness serves as the standard by which we gauge what is central to personal encounter and therefore true, and what is peripheral to faith and thus not theology's priority. This measure is what Brunner calls the *principle of contiguity* according to which all doctrine is to be weighed. This principle facilitates such questions as, How closely related is *X* doctrine to the word of God in Christ? To what extent does the doctrine guide our attention to God and away from itself as the truth? The purpose of the principle is that "the more . . . the testimony about God enables one to hear His address, so much more immediate is the something, the doctrine, connected with the primary concern of the Holy Scriptures."[19]

That said, we must keep in mind that even as the criterion by which our thinking is judged, the apostles' witness is only the *means* to faith; the life, death, and resurrection of Christ alone is the object. One important correlation between the biblical witness and ourselves is that belief in the resurrection is the first point of commonality that we share with the apostles. As the words of Scripture become God's active self-communication to us, the same divine testimony to Christ that took place as God revealed himself to the apostles becomes reality.[20] As a result, Brunner contends that post-apostolic Christians have the same knowledge of Jesus that the apostles had, differing only in the manner in which it is received. We are enabled to encounter God through the word enlivened by the Spirit, "to learn to know Him as they saw Him and knew Him."[21]

Having thus established the reality of personal correspondence, Brunner more precisely describes the connection between encounter and theological inquiry. Revelation alone remains the source of God's self-communication, and we know God only as the Holy Spirit births in us believing hearts. This is the primary concern of faith. Doctrine, on the other hand, retains a secondary role in the life of the Christian community

19. Brunner, *Encounter*, 83.

20. Brunner says it this way in *I Believe in the Living God*, 93: "you believe in the resurrection, not because it is reported by the apostles but because the resurrected One himself encounters you in a living way as he unites you with God."

21. Brunner, *Dogmatics II*, 371.

as it illuminates and safeguards that to which faith has attested over the centuries. As necessary and constructive as dogma is, it is never a substitute for faith.

Danger dawns, warns Brunner, when Scripture as special revelation is traded for philosophical, moral, and rational sources of truth that are concerned more with the ideal absolute than with personal encounter. It is especially the work of polemics that can lead in this direction because preoccupation with heterodoxy, which it is meant to counter, can result "in the statement of questions and concepts which are strange to the simple believer and even to the Bible itself."[22] In this context it could be said that Brunner's attitude shifts beyond suspicion into antipathy for any dogmatic expression that is foreign to the biblical testimony and that moves away from narrative into the realm of metaphysics.[23] He suggests that revelation has very little to do with metaphysics because the word of God does not tell us the *how* of God or of his ways, but rather is concerned with an affirmation of *who* he is. It is not theology's purpose to dissolve mystery but to affirm God's revelation in Christ.

Brunner is ultimately concerned with keeping the word, who is Jesus Christ, central to faith. It is this word of God that is of final consequence; all other words we use in theology are means to the end of communicating this one word. This is his primary preoccupation in placing careful boundaries on the work of theological inquiry, to keep it harnessed not only to the content of Christ but also to the personal encounter that facilitates knowledge of him. This is fundamental to the discussion about the nature and limits of theological inquiry. There remains, though, a burr of discomfort. While one might agree that Jesus is determinative for knowledge of God, and while one might accept that human words are instrumental without being the truth themselves, a question follows. What kind of value does theological language possess for knowing God?

Brunner's response is to affirm the role of doctrine for faith, although the approach to the relation between truth as encounter, special revelation, and the written word is complex. He writes, "We continue to maintain that an abyss lies between what happens in the meeting between God and man in revelation and faith, what happens in this occurrence in the second person and everything that has the form of discussion about 'something true'

22. Brunner, *Encounter*, 11.

23. Brunner, *Mediator*, 35. For further discussion, see Brunner, *Theology of Crisis*, 25; Brunner, *Word and World*, 14–18, 32.

in the third person."[24] We will see that Brunner does acknowledge a limited place for dogma in the larger context of Christian theology, while he warns that the believer must respect doctrine as much for what it does not say as for what it affirms. Depending on how we deal with the Trinity or any other doctrine, equating dogma with faith can become distracting at best, and, at worst, diametrically opposed to revelation.

Encounter and Doctrine

The difference between doctrine and the word of God depicted by Brunner is not as categorical as it might seem; for, he admits, can we not say that God does communicate something about himself? "Can this faith (*pistis*) be consummated in any other way except that we believe 'something' 'which' God says to us?" Accordingly Brunner acknowledges a substantial difference between the first-person language of personal encounter and third-person commentary on that encounter in doctrine. He continues, "The question is whether this abyss is not bridged after all, whether in the act of God's speaking and man's thus being enabled in faith to hear and think the positive relation between Word and doctrine is not already also established."[25]

This is the vital connection for Brunner between Jesus Christ as the word and theological language: the content of God's self-revelation is only communicated and understood within the context of our language about him. As a result, "we can never separate the abstract framework from the personal Presence contained in it, although certainly we must differentiate them . . . Doctrine is certainly related instrumentally to the Word of God as token and framework, serving in relation to the reality—actual personal fellowship with God; but doctrine is indissolubly connected with the reality it represents."[26] Doctrine, therefore, is not something accidental, but it is the necessary means by which God's communication is accessible to us.

Herein Brunner acknowledges an inherent connection between the something said about God and the divine person we seek to know by faith. The order must be kept straight as the former is there to serve the greater reality of the latter.

24. Brunner, *Encounter*, 77.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 79.

> Faith, in other words, is in the final analysis not faith in something—something true, a doctrine; it is not "thinking something," but personal encounter, trust, obedience and love; but this personal happening is indissolubly linked with conceptual content, with truth in the general sense of the word, truth as doctrine, knowledge as perception of facts. God gives Himself to us in no other way than that He says something to us, namely, the truth about Himself; and we cannot enter into fellowship with Him, we cannot give ourselves to Him in trustful obedience, otherwise than by believing "what" He says to us. Since, therefore, this conjunction of token and reality, of signification and what is signified, is already given in the act of divine revelation, we call the connection not only instrumental but sacramental.[27]

To restate it, the something we come to know about God in divine revelation directly corresponds to the person of God that we know through faith-obedience.

A final comment is needed. How is a proper relation between conceptual content and personal encounter maintained in the work of theological inquiry? "It must suffice to recognize that an abysmal difference, and yet at the same time a necessary connection lies between the two . . . The Reformation insight remains valid: Word of Scripture and Word of Spirit, personal directness in doctrinal indirectness, even as Jesus Christ must fulfill the law in order to free us from it."[28] This is the insight and tension that dogmatics must maintain.

PART TWO: THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

Barth's voice, among others, can be heard in Brunner's appreciation of dogmatics, and the reader is right to make such connections, as far as they go. Nevertheless, it is as we approach the doctrine of the Trinity that the unique character of Brunner's methodology comes to the forefront. McGrath's assessment is appreciative: "Brunner is an important . . . contributor to the twentieth century theological debate over the place and function of the doctrine of the Trinity in a Christian dogmatics. The divergences over the place of the dogmatic location and function of the doctrine of the Trinity within the 'dialectical theology' movement of the mid-1920s have not been

27. Ibid., 80.
28. Ibid., 86.

given due attention, and remain an important point of debate in theology. Brunner's position and voice need to be heard."[29] To this doctrine we now turn.

Concern for consistency between the word of God and our words about him is precisely what motivates Brunner to treat the doctrine of the Trinity as he does in *Dogmatics I*. We begin our study by examining the relation between the doctrine and the apostolic witness, followed by Brunner's analysis of the doctrine itself. In his first comments on the subject in the introduction to chapter 16, "The Triune God," Brunner makes what some would take to be a self-evident statement. He asserts that the doctrine of the Trinity is not biblical proclamation and therefore is not considered part of the church's kerygma, but it nevertheless is the doctrine that defends the faith of the church and of Scripture. How can it be that the doctrine of the Trinity is not part of the gospel message but endures as fundamental to the work of theology? This is a difficulty from which he finds no easy escape given his insistence on the centrality of Scripture.

The New Testament Witness

Brunner's methodology requires him first of all to establish the measure of contiguity between the doctrine of the Trinity and the apostolic witness. How closely does the doctrine lie to New Testament data about divine triunity? How does the apostolic witness present the God who reveals himself in human history? We are interested in the movement Brunner makes from the apostolic witness as the source and criterion of theology to the doctrine Trinity as the fruit of theological inquiry. When Brunner speaks of the doctrine of the Trinity, he has in mind specifically the formula *una substantia—tres personae* as the decisive statement crafted and defended by the church fathers. His problem with the dogma is not the veiled divine reality to which it points but the mystery it is often used to dispel.

Brunner's starting point for consideration of the biblical witness is the person of the Father, specifically the "Father in heaven" as the name Jesus taught his disciples. He is not just any father of Old Testament faith or of ancient religion or of a timeless ideal. The Father we know by faith is only revealed as such in the New Testament through the Son. Human beings can know God because through Christ we too become children of God.

29. McGrath, *Reappraisal*, 54.

It is through this intimate, first-person relationship that the Father makes himself known as both holy and loving.

The Father communicates himself in history in two ways: in the incarnation of the Son, and through the witness of the Spirit who testifies in human hearts that Jesus is the Christ. As such it is Jesus who makes the Father known in a unique manner, in a way in which nothing in all of creation or salvation history does. Furthermore, it is the Holy Spirit who reveals Jesus as the Son to human hearts, so that with the apostles we declare, "You are the Christ." The divine–human relation does not end there, though; the Spirit renders the Father and Son present today in the church. Brunner summarizes the relations: "If the Name 'Father' designates the origin and content of the revelation, the Name of the 'Son' designates the historic Mediator, and the 'Holy Spirit' the present reality of this revelation."[30]

The issue of the Son is at the heart of the question of the Trinity even more than the identity of the Father, though the two must be presented together. What did the title 'Son' signify for Jesus' disciples in light of their Jewish heritage? Brunner returns to Pss 2 and 110, which indicate that the Son is the one who reveals the authority of the Father-King through his action, thus expressing the same authority as the one he represents. What is consequently significant for revelation is Jesus' action as the Son, for it is in the context of his doing that his being is disclosed.

Brunner emphasizes how the titles attributed to Christ are intended to underscore his work. The title of Messiah tells us that Jesus is the one who was promised, who fulfils the old covenant. As Revealer he discloses the Father, and as Redeemer he liberates humankind from sin. The titles of Prophet, Priest, and King are similar: Christ is Prophet because he possesses in his person the authority of the divine word; he is Priest because he achieves in his own person reconciliation through the cross; he is King because the rule of God is uniquely inaugurated in time and space during his thirty-three years in the flesh.[31] "All this expresses the fact that Jesus is first of all understood by the Church through His work, His function, His significance for salvation. The Christology of the New Testament . . . is determined throughout by *saving history* (*Heilsgeschichte*) and not by metaphysics."[32] For this reason the identity of Christ cannot be separated from his ministry because it is through his work that we come to know his

30. Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 206–7.

31. For a more detailed discussion of these titles see Brunner, *Dogmatics II*, 271–307.

32. Ibid., 273.

person and the person of the Father who sent him.[33] The conclusion with which the apostles present us is that the Son is God himself.

Whereas the Son receives attention as the historical revelation of God, the Spirit is identified as the experiential testimony to Christ and the inward presence of God. It is only by his work that one recognizes Jesus as the Son. This relationship is central to Brunner's understanding of on-going revelation. "The self-communication of God is not only accomplished in the Historical and the Objective; He seeks us, our very self, our heart . . . The Spirit who dwells within us is indeed the Spirit of God, and what He effects can therefore be nothing less than the manifestation of the life which is his own."[34]

Analysis of the Doctrine

Brunner acknowledges that the problem with the Trinity for the post-apostolic church was not that there are three names around which the New Testament witness turns, but what the relationship is among them. As Christianity spread and encountered various threats from within and without, the issue of a triune Lord could not be left unresolved; so arose the task of the doctrine of the Trinity, the story of which is familiar. During some two hundred years of heterodoxical winds blowing from various directions, the church's response was initially expressed in the Creed of Nicaea with its emphasis on the only begotten Son, followed by the Athanasian Creed emphasizing the triune nature of God. Soon, though, questions were asked about the eternal origin of the Son and the transcendent sphere of the Father and Spirit with him, and the creeds were found wanting in their capacity to respond. Hence, theology's necessary labor led to the tumultuous debate about the Trinity. Brunner appreciates the patristic priority given to Scripture at this point but laments the use of philosophical conjecture in the process that he deems irrelevant to genuine biblical reflection. He has in view the introduction of the term *substantia* that enters the creed and Christian thought and that "has had a particularly disastrous influence . . . To conceive God as Substance is the very sharpest contrast to the Biblical idea of the Absolute Subject." Equally problematic for him is the use of language of *personae*, which cannot escape "an uncertain vacillation

33. For elucidation on the inseparability of work and person, see particularly in chapter XV, 'The Person and Work of Christ," in *Mediator*, 399–415.

34. Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 215.

between Tritheism and Monotheism."[35] Thus he asks, "Is this formula of the Trinity, of the '*tres personae*' and the '*una substantia*,' really in accordance with the center of the message of revelation, the unity of God's Nature and His Revelation?"[36]

From this perspective, it would seem that more harm than good has come from the doctrine's formulation, and that it has side-lined, however inadvertently, the salvation history of biblical revelation. Attention instead was turned to the intra-triune relations and the life of the Trinity itself. Brunner goes on to assert that, besides distracting from that which is revealed in human history to what remains hidden in divine transcendence, there was a further distortion. "The ecclesiastical doctrine of the Trinity aided the growth of the mistaken understanding of *Agape*, the confusion between *Agape* and *Eros*. Since the life of God within the Trinity was severed from the history of Salvation, the *Agape* of God came to be understood as His love for Himself."[37] On one hand, such misunderstandings distract from the work of reconciliation in salvation history, which for Brunner is both the stage and the drama of divine revelation. On the other hand, a positive and central conclusion of the doctrine is that the revealer and the revealed are one. This is the extent to which he affirms the doctrine: God discloses himself in Jesus Christ and is himself the one who loves us from eternity. God is the loving one from eternity because he loves the Son from all eternity. No created order is needed for him to be thus, but rather the created order is an expression of his being love.

With this material in mind it must be asked, to what extent does the doctrine of the triune God reflect Scripture's concern with God's activity to reconcile creation to himself? In other words, where is divine triunity articulated in Scripture as one being in three persons? Brunner affirms that salvation history points to all three names as integral to God's self-revelation and to redemption, reconciliation, and the fulfilment of the kingdom of God. We can say fairly, then, that the New Testament witness reveals God as triune. In so far as the doctrine of the Trinity was meant to affirm and safeguard this revelation, it has value, however limited, for Christian discipleship.

Beyond this restricted use, though, Brunner considers the doctrine unessential for faith. He maintains that, as a metaphysical statement of the

35. Ibid., 239.
36. Ibid., 222.
37. Ibid., 239.

divine being, the doctrine is peripheral to the biblical kerygma and therefore tangential for theology because it fails to reflect God in the event of his drawing near in the God-man. "This rightful attitude of reverent silence before the mystery of God is not served by inventing, by the use of concepts of this kind, a '*mysterium logicum*,'" argues Brunner, "but rather by renouncing the attempt to penetrate into a sphere which is too high for us, and in which our thinking can only lead to dangerous illusions."[38] The difference is critical: faith is preoccupied by the Father's love expressed through Christ and the Holy Spirit in the human story, but the doctrine of the Trinity as a philosophical statement separates who God is from what he does among us.

Brunner distinguishes the doctrine's utility for catechesis from its nonessential role for personal encounter by acknowledging that it is not in conflict with the absolute subject of faith. In other words, the doctrine of the Trinity is differentiated from the event of encounter because no doctrine is prerequisite to faith; at the same time it is not in contradiction to faith (and thereby has relevance for Christian education) in that it safeguards the reality of the divine being as three in one. Moreover, although this doctrine expresses something essential to the Christian message, this message is always given us in the context of God's activity in salvation history. The doctrine consequently should never be considered an invitation to explain the *how* of the intra-triune relations. The role of the doctrine is to preserve the *what* of the biblical revelation—God as Father, Son, and Spirit—and to invite us to worship God in the mystery of faith.

This case study serves to illustrate what Brunner perceives to be the respective natures of, and right relationship between, revelation and doctrine. He maintains that the apostolic witness abides as the hard and fast boundary beyond which theological investigation dares not wander. It would not be too strong a statement to say that, from Brunner's perspective, dogmatics never has need to move beyond God's self-revelation in the historic event of Jesus Christ into the realm of abstract conjecture.[39] If truth is personal encounter, then every formulation of truth must lead towards I–Thou relation with God. In contrast, when we speak of knowing God as adherence to dogmatic statements, we inevitably move in the direction of intellectual speculation and away from fellowship.

38. Ibid., 227.

39. For example, see Brunner, *Encounter*, 87–88.