The Word Became Flesh:

THE CHRIST-CENTERED THEOLOGY

of

EMIL BRUNNER

Towards the Fulfillment of
Systematic Theology II
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Introduction

In 1924 Emil Brunner began his career as a professional theologian at the University of Zurich. He taught, at the same time, systematic and pastoral theology. Brunner never lost track his pastoral calling in the complexity of his theological arguments. His first work: The Mediator: A Study in the Central Doctrine of the Christian Faith, originally published only three years after starting in Zurich, established the tenor of his theological career. The subtitle of the work pointed out his devotion to Christ as the focal point of both Christian faith and doctrine. As we shall see, Brunner viewed every ounce of Christian truth in reference to Christ. His approach to understanding the theological intricacies of creation, humanity, sin, revelation, and restoration rested solidly on Christ. Beyond this, Brunner etched out a very practical and person-focused theology that attempted to escape from underneath the suffocating heap of humanistic rationalization. Purely theoretical and logical attempts to ‘figure out’ God succeed in nothing more than stripping any personhood from God and humankind.¹ Brunner sought to sway the tide of overwhelming speculation and liberalism and return theology to the very personal and person-changing message of Jesus Christ. In what follows I have tried to develop a reasoned explanation of Brunner’s strong connection between anthropology and Christology. Along the way elements from many theological categories have

been integrated.\(^2\) The main idea, though, is that Christ is the complete self-communication of God and the only means by which humanity can be saved into its true form. This paper will explore that theme in the course of Emil Brunner’s theological career through his major works and the theology of revelation, humanity, sin, and Christology therein.

**Revelation**

**Discovery of Truth**

**Rationality and the Truth**

Brunner set out early in his writing career to probe the question of revelation and its role in providing truth. His basic question was how do human beings come into contact with the Divine, or the truth that is beyond them? His answer began with revelation. Revelation, he asserted, is the interface by which human beings can apprehend and verify the truth that is beyond them. Some find this in numerous physical manifestations of deities through the course of history; the sensible provides an access to truth because the truth presents itself again and again. The more refined, however, understand that beyond these recurring instances of tangible, but ultimately primitive, manifestations is a deeper metaphysical truth that undergirds all things. It is this truth that “shines

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through”³ as if it were a great light on the other side of a pierced sheet. The great light may appear in different shapes as determined by cut in the sheet, but behind the particular shapes is a universal being. ⁴ “On one side are many revelations in the sense of actual incidents; on the other, a revelation which does not take place at all but simply ‘is.’”⁵ The characteristic of this revelation is that it is recurring.

Revelation of this sort is available and relies upon the human ability to ascertain the universal truth. Whether through Platonic “contemplation, intuition, [and] mystical experience,” or Aristotelian reason and logical proof,⁶ the ultimate truth can be discovered by a concerted human effort. Extending past early Platonic philosophy, through its revision under Plotinus, taken up by Descartes and then made the jewel of Enlightenment thought, this view of revelation has become firmly entrenched in the modern human mindset.⁷ Humankind’s relationship to truth through revelation is not static, but in a state of becoming; revelation is something to be apprehended by human beings and worked on until the Divine can be ascertained.⁸ At any point of history, because revelation is always available to human faculties, a search for the Divine can be taken up and met with success.

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⁴. *Imago mei*.
⁶. Ibid., 29.
⁷. Ibid., 35.
⁸. Ibid.
Rationality and Civilization

Brunner further developed the concept of humankind’s becoming in his ethical work *The Divine Imperative*. Human beings possess intelligence that creates civilization; here they use the faculty of reflection to organize society and create a secure living environment that promotes self-preservation. At this level human beings are like economists using the commodity of people in search of a “Philistine” social life. The term ‘Philistine,’ however, is one that communicates only the most basic aspect of human existence. In reality this naturalistic understanding of humankind finds the human to be nothing more than a highly developed animal. As the human interacts with the world and the structures within it, he or she gains a higher degree of refinement in adaptation. Brunner referred to Nietzsche’s “ultimate man” and could have made note of the keen observational and manipulative skills of Machiavelli’s ‘Prince’ who also sought to control his social and political life. Like a dog that turns around three times before it lays, a rational animal takes care to in developing his habitat.

In terms of human existence, this process of becoming fits easily with the Darwinian evolutionary schema. At the foundation of Brunner’s theology, ethics,


10. Ibid., 23.


12. Ibid., 23.
and anthropology is the recognition that human beings are constantly and consistently wrestling with their relation to some grand truth outside of themselves. Even an atheist contends with overarching statements about what is right when he asserts there is no God.\textsuperscript{13} The atheist develops an anthropological framework that’s assertions undergird the conclusions he makes about how to live. And no small force have these foundational assertions! Brunner noted well the impact of Darwin’s science on anthropology.\textsuperscript{14} Human beings, as rational animals, begin to develop at a quickening rate and incorporate more procedures and methods. Experimentation confirms and negates certain hypothesis as human rationality puts together the world of truths that lies before its ever refining ability to sense\textsuperscript{15} and measure. Overthrowing any previous notions of delivered revelation, the progress of science puts the truth of life in the hands of men and women doing experiment and analysis.\textsuperscript{16} Rational intellect, then, is the tool of the human who grows more and more capable to ascertain truth.

\textsuperscript{13} Man in Revolt, 25.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 34-35, 38, 58-59.


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 36-37.
Rationality and the Mystic Ideal

Pure Truth

Beyond this very materialistic conception is that of Idealism. Taking what he had asserted in *The Mediator* about the idealist and the mystic who reach forth and conceive of the divine, Brunner painted a picture in *The Divine Imperative* of the sort of human civilization that concretizes that model. This civilization is captained by those who lust after infinity and the danger of “limitless existence.”17 Leaving even that goal behind, the Idealist attempts to make the faculties of the person absolute. Humans create culture; they exercise the energy of the mind not to solve the problems of resources and social order, but to the point of grand scientific truth and abstract artistic expression. The lust is not carnal, but for what is the highest genius of humankind: the search for purest truth. Indeed this level of humankind is only reached after a long road of development – of becoming on the merits of heightened faculty and even mystical experience of the undergirding truth. “Man, in his deepest nature (and this is all that matters) divine, the bearer of the one and the same reason.”18

Within human beings themselves there is a connection with the depth of truth itself.

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18. Ibid., 152.
Beethoven’s Artistic Expression

Brunner found Beethoven, an artist not a scientist, representative of the mystic or Idealist view. Perhaps as the great composer lost his sense of hearing, reasonably considered a great asset, if not a necessity for his trade, he began to rethink the importance of sense. Beethoven came to understand music as a “higher revelation than all wisdom and all philosophy.” Expression of this kind comes from the mind of individuals who are more thoroughly aware of the truth beyond. Ability in this regard notes humans in the pages of history above the masses who do not possess, or exercise, this advantage. Undoubtedly, Beethoven would have comprehensively understood and employed the basic discovered truths of mathematics. But artistry goes far beyond applying numbers to formulas, and Beethoven exercised something beyond the sense and experimentation of rationality when he developed rich musical form. And so it is that Idealism constructs upon and transcends rational naturalism in building and developing a sense of the Divine. Sense and reason come to the aid of Idealistic philosophy in cooperation. So building on concrete forms such as mathematics leads to a higher realization or expression: the symphony. The sounds of the symphony can elicit emotion and indeed touch on some deep truth which arithmetic scratched on the page cannot.

Rationality and the Human Race

Triumph

Natural Rationalism and philosophical Idealism make use of and set as a goal the general and universal revelation “always and everywhere identical,” grounded in the “human spirit.” Thus,

mechanistic or causal evolutionism, the ‘Darwinistic’ philosophy of history, understands history as a course of events determined by causes, on the analogy of the geological process of ‘folding,’ or of the formation of valleys by erosion; the idealistic teleological view understands it as a logical process of the development of ideas, like the coming into being of a book or a work of art. In both cases man is the point of transition and the meaning of an impersonal process... In spite of many important revelations and deliverances – in the end, according to its own view – it stands precisely where it stood at the outset. History has gone round in a circle and beings anew.

Revealed truth, then, is general. It is discovered and defined by human beings in the process of development (or becoming) and ultimately not a definitive statement that depends on something outside of the human being. This is the sort of truth that religion, philosophy, and science has been committed to from the earliest Egyptian cult, to the flowering of Greek thought, through medieval Christendom, in the Enlightenment project and carrying on through to yesterday’s technological breakthrough. For Brunner the problem is not a relatively new one that has come from the flowering of science, but one that is as old as humanity itself.

22. Ibid., 39.

23. Man in Revolt, 446-447.

24. Ibid.
For just that reason, it being a human problem and not a problem with science, Brunner did not wish to abandon scientific inquiry. He felt that the modern evolutionary theory in his day was “supported by such a mass of observations and established facts that no one with insight [could] fail to be convinced by its arguments.” Instead of science, it was actually the Christian battle against science for the hearts and minds of people in the pew that served up the real error. As long as the church held doggedly to an historical understanding of Adam and Eve, and as long as the believer could not maintain its historicity in light of paleontological conclusions, the debate would cause average people to abandon God as their ethical lodge pole.

Brunner accused Schleiermacher of replacing “the fundamental Christian view of the origin of man, and [substituting it with] an idealistic, evolutionary theory with a strongly naturalistic bent; for the idea of the origin in Creation he substitutes that of the goal of evolution of a universal spiritual process.” That is, when the entire persuasive power of the doctrine of sin and the Fall is founded on the literal and historical truth of the Eden story, and that foundation is chipped away, the doctrine falls with it. God is swept away with the Garden and human beings rush into the vacuum created by his exit. Liberal individuals and churches, with no proof for God, begin to build an anthropology and

25. Ibid., 41.
26. Ibid., 89.
27. Ibid., 120.
theory of redemption based on human ability and progression. Brunner was not prepared for science to be the determining factor pertaining to the soul and eternity. He advocated, therefore, for the “abandonment of the historical form of the doctrine.” In abandoning the historical claims, he hoped to accomplish the opposite of what Schleiermacher had: to abandon the particular story but save the grand Truth behind it.

Failure

The criticism Brunner had of naturalistic, idealistic, and liberal positions was their great emphasis on human capability. He felt the tall tower of human ability ultimately came crashing down on top of itself. While scientific assertions were accurate, the epistemological error is that it does not recognize the limits of this conception of man. This error is fated to have the most tragic consequences for the history of mankind. Man as a perceptible object in the cosmos is a wholly insignificant, infinitesimal entity; he is, so to speak, a mere nothing in the processes of nature. The man who understands himself in terms of the physical universe, who considers himself wholly as a product of evolution, can no longer discover any meaning or value in this life of his.

The issue is not that science fails to convey material truths about human physical existence, but that as a metaphysic it leaves breathing, dancing, and crying.


human beings in the void. As an ethic, Brunner noted the emptiness that the resulting materialism left in its wake:

The more this-worldly men become, the more violent and unscrupulous they become. ... That one sees clearly enough today precisely in the states that have made this radical this-worldliness their philosophy of state. When they do not trouble themselves at all about an eternal life, men allow themselves to be consumed in the chase after the goods of this world; and this pursuit of earthly goods as the single purpose of life makes the individual as well as nations, in private life, in business life as well as in politics, brutal, unscrupulous, hard, and common. This radical this-worldliness makes every man a competitor, and so leads to conflict between all men.31

The ironic, and sad, sum is that humanism leads to inhumanity.

Delivery of Truth

The Voice of the Other

Brunner’s response, the main thrust of his theological contribution, was that "Christianity, and Christianity alone, is the absolute opposite of this form of religion."32 Christianity introduces an element of revelation completely distinct from the non-historical, metaphysically-obsessed religion of human beings. Jesus Christ does not represent any progression in human understanding; he was not a "religious genius"33 or hero of culture that helped human beings in becoming better attuned to the truth of the Divine. What Christ represents is the historical reality that brings the Divine to man. If revelation is exclusively general and the


33. Ibid., 39.
truth man contends with beyond himself is accessible by some form of investigation or contemplation, then humans can become the ideal they seek. Christ denies that possibility and defines history – shatters its very framework by his own coming. The person, the human race, is not helped along the way to self-fulfillment but completely interrupted. The cacophonous monologue of human-determined principles and values, so vitally taken up by philosophers, scientists, and mystics does not capture truth but takes away the dignity of the human being. Brunner has argued in length towards the anything-but-positive results of forsaken responsibility and forlorn materialism. Building on the work of Martin Buber and especially Ferdinand Ebner here, he claimed: “nothing save a real relation to a real “Thou” can dispel this solitude of the soul; only a real conversation, in which we are actually addressed by another person, can made us responsible... But the voice of this Other cannot be a human voice.” Christ is the voice of the Other. He is the definite Word of God on the subject of Truth and he makes possible the communication of human beings with secret will of God. In this communicative effort God acts to correct the empty self-talk of


35. The Mediator, 27.

36. Ibid. 209. “Autonomy, the principle of immanence, the principle of the self-sufficiency of the human reason, is the exact opposite of the real communication of the Logos, and of self-knowledge” (211).

37. Ibid., 212.
rational or mystical human beings: “God Himself steps on to the stage, and we retire.” 38

A Fixed Reference

An analogy from physics may elucidate the claims that Brunner was making. In the early part of the twentieth century Albert Einstein developed the theories of special and general relativity. Without getting into the complexities, his fundamental assertions were based on the premise that there was no possible fixed point in the universe by which to measure the definite velocity of another object. 39 In any sort of physical observation or experiment, the velocity of one object, an arrow perhaps, is relative to the seemingly fixed position: that of the bow. To an observer who is standing at the position of the bow, the arrow moves away quickly. But that observer only observes the movement of the arrow in that way because he or she is moving through the solar system on earth as fast, relatively, as the bow is. To a fictional observer standing on Mars, however, the movement of the arrow from the bow would appear very different. The archer who is fixed in one spot on earth is only fixed in relation to the earth, but the earth is moving itself in relation to the sun. The main concept is that any locally fixed point of reference is still itself moving, whether it is the miniscule bow or massive galaxy. Local environments are fixed only in the sense

38. Ibid., 283.

of the observer, and only in reference of one local thing to another. Due to this we can apply Newton’s physical laws. On a universal scale, however, we cannot apply an overarching physical law because there is no observer who is fixed in the environment of the Universe; hence, no absolute fixed position.

As far as a scientific observation and set of principles with which to do the work of a physicist, Brunner had no problem. As we have observed, he felt that religion’s battle against rational science enshrined poor theology and degraded faith. The problem arose, however, when this concept of ‘no fixed reference point’ began to be applied to the categories of philosophy, ethic, and political ideology – when it informs not how we measure red-shift but when we shift to the Reds. If there is no fixed reference point for the question of being, then the best people can do is use themselves, the most fixed reference point they can determine, to work out the issues of right and wrong. No matter how complex, how much involved in so-called revealed religious truth, Brunner knew that if God is not fixed referent, then social and political systems collapse.

Christ as the Ground of Humanity

God through Jesus Christ is not a local reference point that himself (like the arrow to the bow, or the galaxy to the universe) is still moving in relation to the progress of humankind. He is not a teacher who stands closer in relation to the Truth than others and graciously assists others on their way. Rather he is the

40. My hopefully clever play on the difference between the investigation of the expanding movement of the Universe and the movement of the Bolsheviks.
Word who is the Truth. Where Einstein could not find a fixed reference point in the physical universe, Brunner found Christ to be a fixed referent in a different sense. Physically, Christ walked upon the same dusty roads in an ever receding galaxy unknown to his people; and yet beyond the physical sense, Christ is rooted in that eternal and impenetrable\(^{41}\) fixed location. Human beings are only defined in reference to Christ. Morality slips and drifts when human beings use themselves as a reference point.\(^{42}\) Indeed this is because human beings do not know what being truly human is in order to attain it.\(^{43}\) Christ breaks into the world and establishes the ethic of love in a way that was never conceived of by humankind. For all the genius of humankind, for all of the progress through speculation and rapture, the Divine reality of Christ demonstrated an inconceivable level of self-giving love that human reason casts off as foolish. “In this fact lies the possibility of our becoming human; this Christ is the real ground of a life in love. To understand Him means to understand that we belong to our brethren.”\(^{44}\)

\(^{41}\) The Mediator, 228, 238, 271.

\(^{42}\) The Divine Imperative, 31; Brunner represents the same argument about the loose ethical starting point of the Pantheon of gods as Clement of Alexandria in Pedagogue.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 40.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 57.
Sin

Autonomy

Progressive Theology and De-Personalization

The key to understanding the right way to live is to abandon the addiction to autonomy. Human beings crave self-determination. In one of his last works: The Christian Doctrine of God, Vol. 1 of Dogmatics, Brunner took great pains to point out the flaws in speculative and theological philosophy. In his view a terrible amount of damage had been done by theologians working with "philosophical speculation on the Absolute."45 Theological writers such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Augustine so embraced and incorporated Neo-Platonic thought into Christian theology that they effectively emptied God of any relational capability.46 God became an ideal to work toward, an object of discovery in the process of rational metaphysics. A genuine student of the Bible in the Middle Ages (perhaps a strictly theoretical assertion by Brunner) would be “oblivious” to the foreign God of Scholastic Theology.47 The work and error compounded through the years to supply a rational underpinning for the “biblicist’ procedure”48 of defining God by the measure of human literal reading. Brunner scorned these procedures in his Dogmatics because they evinced the very problem that revelation is supposed to correct: autonomy.

46. Ibid., 152-153.
47. Ibid., 244.
48. Ibid., 246.
Unyielding Self-Assertion

Autonomy is at the heart of sin. Autonomy is asserting oneself over and against the one who is Creator. Human beings want to be the measure of their own existence and presume to develop themselves instead of be developed. Autonomous reason chafes when it comes against God (‘Thou’) because it wants to determine for itself what it is not capable of determining. This is a present reality for everyone, captured by the Apostle Paul: “every godless man... does not give honour to the God who made himself know to him, but obscures the divine revelation by the productions of his own undisciplined imagination and arbitrariness. This disposition to trade the Truth for self was recently captured by an acquaintance of mine who wrote: ‘when God gives you lemons, you get a new god.’ For Brunner this very disposition is the result of rational autonomy, even in the circles of theology, when it folds to philosophical speculation. The new god, by the way, is really oneself. The drive to negate Christ’s definitive revelation of God is so strong because reason wants to capture God. Reason wants to define, understand, and manipulate Truth: this is the most basic human condition – this is sin. Reason cannot yield to self-communication because that makes it dependent. It will not take hold of the self-giving love that is foolishness, nor will it yield to the ethic it demands.

49. Man in Revolt, 129-130.

50. Ibid., 107; cf. The Divine Imperative, 154.

Theonomy

God is the First Principle

But that is the only answer! For what standard do humans have to create or judge a deity? How can reason take hold of the very first principle of existence? The God of Creation and Truth, for Brunner, must be self-communicated because “creation and a personal God serve to mark that thought has reached its limit.” This God is the first principle, the axiomatic element upon which all else is based. He is more than a controllable and comprehendible idea.

...the relation of man to God is secondary, not primary. That is, man can know God only as God gives himself to be known: this is the fundamental Biblical point of view. ...this knowing is therefore an event, an act. God gives himself to be known, he reveals himself, he communicates himself. On the basis of this revelatory happening or act, man can also know God and his relation to Him, which is established by God.

When Brunner took on this position, he took it with vigor. In so many ways and in so many streams of argument, this was the critical premise.

The First Principle Made Known

He knew Christ to be the critical manifestation of God; ethics, and not the merely the abstract theory, but the daily practice of making God to be God in

52. Philosophy of Religion, 79.
53. Ibid., 82.
54. Ibid., 75.
55. Truth as Encounter, 90.
the life of the human being, turns on the coming of Christ. He is the embodiment of the whole message, the “God [who] looks at us out of eternity with a human face.” He is the focal point of all history and accessible to all humanity; he is the living and present communication of God Himself for me, now, today. He is the “archetype” of humanity in whom humans know not only God, but themselves:

Jesus Christ is the sole ‘place’ in the world where one can see God, and because we see God there, we also see ourselves anew in truth. Of ourselves we do not know who we are; we do not rightly know what the Bible means in saying “God created man in his own image.” Nor do we rightly know that we are sinners and lost creatures. Both can be known only when one knows God, but we do not know God. Who God is, and who we are, is revealed to us in Jesus Christ by God Himself. God had to come to us as man to show us ourselves, our own creation, and our own sin. But He came and showed us ourselves and Himself, to lead us from the lie unto the truth, from damnation to salvation, from perdition and death to life and blessedness.


57. Ibid., 142.


60. Ibid.

61. *Our Faith*, 65; emphasis mine.
Only the Creator: Jesus Christ the Word of God who brought everything into being, and in whom all things consist, being prior and independent, can define himself and define humans. In one of Brunner’s matured descriptions, from his penultimate publication, he fit together his theology of creation, Christ, ethic, and man – summarizing it, indeed, with the greatest truth a person can take hold of and utter:

The ‘I-Thou’ comes first; hence from the outset, and not later on, this truth has ethical force. For the fact that man belongs to God implies the whole truth of responsibility and of all moral obligation. In Jesus Christ we meet Him who addresses us as absolute Lord, and therefore as the Creator of all things: ‘I, thy Lord, the Creator.’

Christ is the alpha and the omega; he is the Lord, thoroughly.

**Humanity**

**Necessary Responsibility**

Even in the entrenched autonomous and hostile nature, the human being remains a responsible person. Disconnected from the Lordship of God, the human exists in a sort of darkness or alienation from proper life. “True humanness and true freedom, however, both of which are lost by the emancipation from God, are present only when man knows and acknowledges his complete dependence on God.” In this so called ‘emancipation’ only the individual’s sense of existence and behavior governs life. What is completely

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64. *Truth as Encounter*, 93.
lacking, however, is any means whatever by which to remove oneself from the land of alienation. While there is conscience, it is no deep moral truth which directs the intellect toward what is right. Rather it is a dull pain, a symptom of something gone wrong. Conscience, for Brunner, is like the miniscule glowing red ‘check engine’ light in a little truck travelling the vast emptiness of a dark California desert road – the travelers far from home and without tools. It gives warning that something is amiss, but is entirely vague and in no way helps to fix the potential problem. And yet, in the midst of this bleak scene, the human being is responsible for the state in which he journeys. Brunner’s reading of Paul convinced him that God’s revelation in creation, even before the revelation of Christ Jesus, forces responsibility. Moreover, “responsibility is not an attribute, it is the ‘substance’ of human existence... [it] is that which makes every human being a real human being.” In the very fact that one is a person, distanced from the personal God, lies the reality of responsibility.

Impossible Responsibility

Brunner’s idea of human responsibility is tricky, but a vital cog in the machinery of his theology of faith and imago Dei. He employed the dialectical


66 Never have I felt quite so distanced as on this very sort of deserted road north of Blythe, California, Christmas of 2007; distanced, but luckily not stranded.


68. Pun intended.


70. *Man in Revolt*, 50; the following discussion is built on the text of pp. 49-53.
method of holding together paradoxical assertions in order to develop this understanding.71 Here those assertions are that ‘human beings are only truly human because they are responsible,’ and ‘because humans do not live responsibly, they are not fully human.’ To understand Brunner here we must first understand that in alienation one is oblivious to the truth of dependency and responsibility in relation to God. The biblical conception of sin defines this lifestyle: one in which true responsibility is foreign to knowledge. At her indestructible base, however, a person is made to be a person who is responsible in relation to God. A person is responsible but has lost all sense of responsibility because he has chosen to live in an autonomous way that negates living in a responsible manner.

God Defines Humanity

In other words, the ‘I-Thou’ relationship that exists between the human and the Creator definitively establishes that human beings are not independent creatures who can determine their own lives and ethics. On that first principle there is no room to move: God always defines humankind. The fact that humans have rejected that reality in practice does not make it false, nor does it magically make them any less responsible. In no way can a human ever come to define himself and lift responsibility off his shoulders. If, then, a human is

human because he is dependent upon, or responsible to, God, then ceasing to be responsible is ceasing to be human. And yet that is what people do when they lack all sense of responsibility – they cease to be truly human. Humanity is defined in reference, or in relationship, to God. No matter how much a person denies God, God does not go away – he continues to define who the person is. Therefore the person continues to be defined in reference to God, and continues to be responsible.

An Analogy of Reference Points

Perhaps I can explain this concept by drawing again on the language of the fixed reference. If a young child is sitting in a lake on a floating tube and he pushes against the dock, the child will move away from the dock. In no way could the child push the dock away from himself in this situation.72 In Brunner’s theology God is the dock; God is always the fixed reference. To push away from God by ignoring him and exchanging the truth for a lie is to move oneself farther and farther from what is solidly true. Humans never cease to be humans because God never ceases to be the fixed reference that defines what humanity is. And yet the human loses any concept of his relation, or responsibility, to God because he has distanced himself so greatly. God gets smaller and the human gets larger. One day, returning to my analogy of Brunner’s concept, the child is so far from the dock that he loses all sense of it.

72. Einstein’s model would hold that dock is moving away from the child just as the child is moving from the dock because no fixed reference point in the Universe is available.
He cannot find the mere speck on the horizon that is the dock. The child is still a human in his forlorn flotation, but he must get back to the dock! Only there can he stand and run, instead of being carried by a current in paralyzed isolation. Only there can he embrace his father and family. The concrete dock is where he can live the way he is supposed to live. Responsibility as a defining human characteristic is static because God is static. Loss of responsibility, namely the essential quality of truly human expression, is the result of abandoning that very same static essence of God in favor of the blind life of self. True humanity is fully realized in God alone.

Faith as the Bridge

God: the Giving Person

Faith is the means by which the distance between God and humanity is bridged.

Faith as the renewed knowledge of man’s lost origin through the re-establishment of the beginning in the centre of history, is both existence and knowledge. It is a new understanding of our nature as man, and a new life. It means that man, who had been separated from his origin, has been re-united, both in knowledge and in love.

Where conscience is only a dim indicator of a reality, faith illuminates the mind to truth. The sinner is no longer distanced and ignorant and but sees clearly his responsibility. Faith also affects a tangible change in the status of the person:

73. See Emil Brunner, The Misunderstanding of the Church, trans. Harold Knight, (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2002), 24; proper communal relations are only realized in the truth of Christ.

74. Man in Revolt, 52.

75. The Divine Imperative, 158; cf. Revelation and Reason, 170.
where once he was responsible for his autonomy, faith has allowed the work of love the “divinely acquit”76 him. “The personality is made truly ‘itself’ when it is with God”77 and no longer in vain isolation. Brunner conceived of faith in the sense of surrender78, not assertion. God communicates himself unconditionally through the act of love. Built solidly on the notion that God cannot be rationally discovered – and that this is the problem to begin with – God gives himself.79 “Faith is the single ‘answering’ acceptance of the Word of God, the correct, fitting answer to the first freely given Creator-Word of God.”80 The self-communication God is received by the person.

Human: the Receiving Person

Where Brunner ran into the most controversy was in his understanding of the rational receptive capability of faith. Akin to his notion of responsibility, Brunner’s concept of the general revelation turned on some understanding of the human ability to perceive God through nature. Even though he argued vigorously that having responsibility and knowing it were at the opposite ends of the spectrum, he allowed for some measure of human reason. In Man in Revolt, an early anthropological treatise, he referred to it as an organ of perception

76. Ibid., 159.
77. Ibid., 160.
78. Man in Revolt, 539-540.
79. “Hence all other ‘knowledge’ of God is an idolatrous materialization of God, however ‘spiritualized’ and abstract it may be.” The Christian Doctrine of God, 192; see ch.15 and its appendix for Brunner’s development of the agape-love theme.
80. Truth as Encounter, 104.
created by God for the reception of self-communication. In a work with a singular focus towards the issue, *Nature and Grace*, he developed a more specific understanding of the capability of human beings to receive the Word of God. He recognized a formal Image of God that was not utterly destroyed by sin. If God’s plan is to meet with human beings on a personal level, he must be able to communicate with them.

This point of contact is the formal *imago Dei*, which not even the sinner has lost, the fact that man is man, the *humanitas* in the two meanings defined above: capacity for words and responsibility. Not even sin has done away with the fact that man is receptive of words, that he and he alone is receptive of the Word of God. But this ‘receptivity’ must not be understood in the material sense. This receptivity says nothing as to his acceptance or rejection of the Word of God. It is purely the formal possibility of his being addressed.

Running headlong into the strong momentum of the number Nein!, Brunner took criticism from a fellow Swedish theologian for allowing some capability on the part of humankind. Karl Barth posited something like a blank state (*tabula rasa*) where it did not matter if the receptive creature was a human or a cat, the platform for salvation was made wholly by the Divine action. Brunner understood the human being to be very different in creation from all other creature: made to know and communicate with Christ the man.

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83. Ibid., 31.

84. Jewett, *Emil Brunner: An Introduction to the Man and His Though*, 16; cf. *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 176 n.1, where Brunner is “pleasantly surprised” to find an affirmation in Barth of some part of humankind not wiped out by the fall.
Christ the Medium

While some of his terms evolved over the years, Brunner’s essential position about the person remained fast. Later he confirmed that position in Truth as Encounter. Personhood has not been lost in the sense that the person becomes something less than human. Fellowship with God is lost can be created in and through Christ. When Christ is poured out on the heart of the person, he or she is able to shine forth the image of God. Any human ability to love and act in righteousness is not done of its own accord, but wholly on account of Christ’s work and the witness of Holy Spirit. God created the human abilities of speech and reason originally. When Christ came in flesh he did not make speech anew, but used it to communicate the truth that could make people anew. Words are not new and human reason is not completely defunct in its search for God. Reason has a place, but it is a limited place that cannot grow into “that proud, autonomous reason which will not curb its tendency to system, which seeks to discover God at the end of a syllogism, and which thus reduces Him to a theory.” No theoretically derived god could ever measure up to the Holy God of Scripture; he must communicate his own reality with the

85. See the revisions to “Nature and Grace” in Man in Revolt (an earlier work revised in later years), 94-98, 513-515, 537-540.


87. Our Faith, 5-6; The Christian Doctrine of God, 75-76.

language available to humans. Christ is the communicative bridge that spans the gaping chasm separating humanity from the Holy Lord. Only faith can take hold of this communication and elicit the surrender by which human life can take on its authentic character.

The Image of God: Christ’s Person and Work

The *Imago Dei* for Brunner begins and ends with Jesus Christ. The Word of God, who in these later days we have come to know in Jesus Christ, is the origin of the Divine and the source of human life. If Christ has created human life, he created it in such a way as to be relational and responsible to himself. Freedom to respond to the Lord Christ is not something developed by human intuition or rational inquiry, but an ability that comes from the Creator alone. It is a means by which the Creator can be in a legitimate relationship with beings. And those beings can come to enjoy an unforced communion with the very source of life. Faith takes hold of the *imago Dei* and re-creates it in the human person only because of Christ’s act to reveal what that image can be. Brunner rejected any sense that the image of God was a substance located in the human for his or her own use. Rather, the image of God was gained in complete dependence relation to Christ. Relation purges any idea that man “possesses

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92. Ibid., 58.
the Divine reason in himself." In his last direct word on the subject of *imago Dei*, Brunner came back to the original Christological assertion he made in the dawn of his writing career. Any share a man or woman has in eternal life, fellowship with the Creator, and the image of God cannot be,

... in Jesus Christ the lost Word comes back again to man. God restores human beings who have lost their reference by placing himself in reference to them. God restores humankind not by its own ability, but by the chance to receive his complete self-giving gift of Christ.

**Conclusion**

Christ is the beginning and the end in the theology of Emil Brunner; he is the first Word, he is the definition of true humanity, he is the way in which humans can understand God, and he is the end to which everything is directed. Jesus Christ is the complete and definitive picture of God in history and for each and every person, and Emil Brunner based his entire life and theology upon preaching that Word. Brunner’s impact on the development of post-WWI Christian theology has had an indelible mark on the evangelical church. Brunner’s adaptation of ‘I-Thou’ concepts for Christian theology has served to define ‘relationship with Jesus’ sermons and evangelistic plans throughout the

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93. Ibid., 60.

world. While some of those sermons and evangelistic programs are based on the concepts of freedom and the richness of free personal response to a God, we would do a great service to the preaching of the Word (that is Jesus Christ) if we took careful time in Brunner’s thorough and heartfelt thought. I have found a great resource in his writings and plan to continue along the road of ministry and theology with him in the conversation.
Primary Texts by Emil Brunner


Secondary Materials

