

Brunner on Revelation

Robert W. Bertram

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Professor Emil Brunner, the Reformed theologian at the University of Zurich, probably requires little introduction. He, more than any others of the so-called neo-orthodox theologians from Europe, has fast found his way into American Protestant theological thinking, his books seem to be showing up more and more frequently even in Lutheran parsonages, and his name has appeared a number of times in past issues of this very journal. This wide respect which Brunner enjoys is not undeserved. He has been considerably instrumental in encouraging Protestant theologians to return to the rock whence they were hewn, to the classical Christian doctrines enunciated in the Scriptures and reasserted by the Reformers. Moreover, Brunner's thought is distinguished by a remarkable versatility and scholarly breadth. All this, and perhaps a good deal more, should be said to Brunner's great and lasting credit (especially since what will finally be said about him in this article is negative and critical) as a warning to those who would wish to wave him lightly aside as unworthy of serious attention. There is no doubt about it, Brunner is a theologian of importance. And precisely because he is important (and for other reasons too), his own theology deserves the same careful, critical concern with which he himself has theologized.

I

"Revelation's" Distinguishing Traits

A word which in Brunner's system has attained almost to the dignity of a blessed word, and one which he has managed to reinstate in respectable theological parlance, is the word "revelation." That with which every Christian theologian has to deal, from beginning to end, is, Brunner insists, divine revelation.¹ That which accords to the Scriptures their unique authority is their power to convey God's revelation.² That which entitles Jesus to be the Christ, the divine Mediator, is His office of mediating to us the self-disclosure of God, God's self-revelation.³ The implications and ramifications of what Brunner means by revelation are, as one would guess, exceedingly intricate. We might, for example, note the ways in which he relates the concept of revelation to the three-fold agency of Scripture, Church, and Holy Spirit,⁴ or the ingenious contrasts and connections which he draws between "revelation and reason,"⁵ or the distinct functions which he assigns to revelation in systematic theology on the one hand and in polemic, or "eristic," theology on the other hand.⁶ Each one of these areas is an essay topic in itself.

¹ "Die andere Aufgabe der Theologie," *Zwischen den Zeiten*, VII (1929), p. 260.

² *The Divine-Human Encounter*. (tr. By A. W. Loos), Philadelphia: The Westminster Press (1943), pp. 171-172.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 139 ff

⁴ *Revelation and Reason* (tr. By Olive Wyon), Philadelphia: The Westminster Press (1946), pp. 118-184.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4112 ff

⁶ "Die andere Aufgabe der Theologie," *op. cit.*

However, there is still another approach which, I think, will lead us even more quickly and directly to an understanding of Brunner's notion of revelation, namely, to abstract from that notion those characteristics which, for him, are of the very essence of revelation itself, those very basic properties which define and identify revelation as revelation, those fundamental attributes without which, according to Brunner, the Christian revelation would not be what it is. At least four such distinguishing features of revelation (although Brunner himself does not explicitly speak of them as such) may be discriminated. First, this revelation is of the nature of an encounter between persons: believers are personally confronted by a personal God. Second, this revelation is initiated by a God who transcends absolutely man's capacity to know Him, and thus, breaking into man's natural "circle of immanence" from beyond, revelation is apprehended not by any human rational deliberation, but only by faith. Third, this revelation comes to men in historical events, but in historical events which are absolutely unique and are therefore unintelligible to natural human reason. Fourth, this revelation comes as a "Word"; that is, to those who receive it in faith it is not a meaningless experience, but rather it makes sense, it has an understandable significance. In these four distinguishing features we have, I suggest, an instructive clue to what Brunner means by his key concept, revelation. In the paragraphs which follow we shall elaborate these four features, each in its turn, a little more fully.⁷

A. Revelation as Personal Encounter

Divine revelation, Brunner maintains, is of the nature of an encounter between persons; believers are personally confronted by a personal God.⁸

Man is created to live in the peculiarly personal relationships of trustful obedience to God and love to his neighbors. Such relationships are conceivable only between beings who are persons. In fact, it is his living in just such relationships as these which defines man as personal. Conversely, because men do not respond to God and to one another personally, because they have insisted instead on reducing, by an act of depersonalization, the "thou" of God and of neighbor into an abstract, neuter "it," into an impersonal thing, they have thereby fallen short not only of their own person-hood, but of their essential humanity, the very destiny for which they have been intended by their Creator.

Why does Brunner so strongly castigate this depersonalization as sinful? He seems to have two reasons. One reason is, if I may so say it, psychological, or subjective, and the other is ontological, or objective. It is sinful psychologically, or subjectively, in that it reveals man's own proud ambition to be God, his lust for transforming himself from finite creature into infinite Creator, his rebellious refusal to be responsible to anyone but himself, his overweening desire to subjugate God and his neighbors to his own selfish ends. Stirring within every sinner's bosom is the evil wish that he, rather than be dominated by God, may himself dominate God and his neighbors and may bring them into a position where he can control and manipulate them at will. The most characteristic

⁷ Since most of what follows is a less direct duplication of Brunner's thought than an indirect exposition of it – and a rather free exposition at that – I have made specific documentary reference to Brunner's writings in only a few footnotes. The main sources in his theology which bear on the subject at hand are his *The Divine-Human Encounter*, *op. cit.*, and *Revelation and Reason*, *op. cit.* Unfortunately, I have not been able to consult his latest work in dogmatics.

⁸ *The Divine-Human Encounter*, *op. cit.*, *passim*; *Revelation and Reason*, *op. cit.*, p. 20 ff.

way in which man tries to accomplish this wish is to reduce God and his neighbors to ideas or concepts in his own mind – abstract, intellectualized “its” rather than free and sovereign “thous” – for in that way he may have them in his own power. No longer shall they transcend his feeble attempts to understand them, no longer need he be perplexed by their mysterious unpredictability, for now he has captured them by understanding them, by imprisoning them in the finite categories of his mind, by manipulating them as just so many theological and philosophical propositions.⁹ He may pretend, yes, he may even deceive himself into believing that he loves and trusts them, but what in fact he loves and trusts are the creatures of his own intellect. What was not finite has by him been made finite, what was undefinable he has now managed to define. *Libido sciendi*, Brunner seems to be saying, is but the obverse of *libido dominandi*.

Second, this depersonalization is sinful ontologically, or objectively, since it makes into an it what, *in reality*, as a matter of sheer *objective fact*, is not an it. To truncate a personal thou into a bare conceptualization is not only irreligious and immoral, it is also untrue. When I have substituted for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob some dogmatician’s doctrine about God, or when I have substituted for you my ideas about you, then I do not really know God and I do not really know you. There is, of course, nothing amiss in my regarding a tree or my car or a philosophical proposition or even a Beethoven sonata as an it, as a thing, for that indeed is what it is. And it may be, Brunner would say, that as a botanist, or a physicist, or a logician, or a musicologist, I can, by systemic analysis, exhaust what such a thing means and is. That is, I have at my disposal as a rational being the categories for adequately interpreting such experience. But to deal so with persons, who are not things, is quite another matter. When men, as they are continually wont to do, gossippingly “explain” their fellow men in terms of the latter’s “guilt feelings” or “insecurity,” as though these fellow men were nothing but elaborate mechanical concatenations of efficient causes, when men conceive of their neighbors as mere occasions for selfish gratification, or, what is worst of all, when men construe God as but a guarantee against their own disappointment or reduce Him to a neuter cosmic principle or to an inanimate theological dogma, even though the dogma be Scripturally sound, then men have illegitimately taken the categories of their understanding – which, to be sure, apply well enough to “its” – and have applied them to “thous,” where they do not apply at all. This is to distort what really is into what is not. Like a good Kantian, Brunner is saying that there are some experiences (experiences of things) whose meaning can be exhausted by the categories which are “immanent” within human reason, and there are other experiences (experiences of persons) whose meaning “transcends” these categories. And like a good Augustinian, Brunner says that the sinful perversity of man’s will leads him also into untruth, into a distortion of the very nature of reality.

A person can be fully known by me only when he *wills* to let me know him and only when I in turn *will* to accept him as just such a freely willing person.¹⁰ An impersonal thing, on the other hand, like a tree or a logical proposition, does not have that power of will. A person is a center of will who makes his own decisions and initiates his own activity, who responds to others and is responsible for his responses, who can choose either to withhold from me, or to share with me, his inner being, his sympathies and ideals. Far from ever being reducible to a mere known “object” of my thought, he is

⁹ *The Divine-Human Encounter*, pp. 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 32 ff.

himself always a knowing “subject,” just as I am. And it is only when I am related to him, not as subject to object, or as “I” to “it,” but rather as subject to subject, or as “I” to “thou,” that genuine knowledge can transpire between us. He must decide to disclose himself to me, and I must wait and rely on his decision. For this reason the most profoundly personal relationships, Brunner maintains, are achieved in love, above all in forgiving love, where the “thou” gives his very self to me unstintingly and with all his proud defenses down, and where I respond to him with a like love and humility.

This genuinely personal relationship is the ideal not only between men and men, but also between men and God. Indeed it is most manifest in that relationship of God to His creatures which Brunner calls “revelation,” for here the Most High God, who in His sovereign freedom is “wholly other” than His creation and who transcends every presumptuous human attempt to reduce Him to a thinkable object, does now willingly condescend to disclose Himself to sinful men. By God’s merciful decision to reveal His own Person to our persons through another Person, Jesus Christ, the vast and unbridgeable gulf which otherwise separates the infinite God from the finite reach of man’s understanding has now been spanned. In God’s appearing to us Subject to subjects, rather than as Object to subjects, He has achieved what Brunner speaks of as the divine-human encounter, or revelation. And His revelation of Himself as divine Person overcomes also the sinful depersonalization to which man is addicted, and overcomes it (if we may revert to our earlier distinction) both objectively and subjectively: objectively, by enabling us to recognize as personal what in reality and truth is personal, and subjectively, by lovingly inspiring in us that trust which desires no longer arrogantly to subjugate “thous” as “its.” According to Brunner, this peculiarly personal confrontation distinguishes what is revelation from what is not.

B. Revelation as Absolutely Transcendent

This revelation, furthermore, is initiated by a God who transcends absolutely man’s capacity to know Him and thus, breaking into man’s natural “circle of immanence” from beyond, revelation is apprehended not by a human relational deliberation, but only by faith.¹¹

What Brunner seems to be saying here is that there are some things which man is capable of knowing, and there are some things which man is not capable of knowing, and all this simply because man is what he is. Just as, we might say, the paper before your eyes can reflect light or can displace a certain amount of space, but cannot digest food or cannot withstand fire simply because that is the *nature* of paper, so also Brunner would say, I imagine, that man’s powers and limitations are dictated by man’s *nature*, by what man essentially is. There are certain possibilities and certain impossibilities which are “immanent,” inherent, within human nature. And this is the “circle” in which man is caught; he cannot get outside of it.

Something like this at least seems to be implied in Brunner’s phrase, the “circle of immanence.” Just exactly what, and how much, he means by that phrase it is difficult to say. My guess would be that he is here borrowing heavily from the post-Kantian tradition in German philosophy; even though he frequently and sharply criticizes this philosophical tradition, he does seem sometimes to have allowed that tradition to set the problem for him and to prescribe the terminology and the frame of reference

¹¹ *Revelation and Reason*, p. 32 ff.

within which he himself operates. If this is so, then what he means by the “circle of immanence” might amount to something like the following. Consider again, as an example, the paper at which you are looking, and notice the ways in which you, as a human knower, make sense out of it and understand it. For one thing, you see it as something spread in space from top to bottom and from side to side, and as being surrounded spatially on one side by the opposite page and on the other sides by the top of your desk, and as being closer to your eyes, spatially, than the floor is and slightly closer than the desk-top is and not quite as close to your eyes as your glasses are. In other words, one of the inescapable ways in which you as a man perceive things is as though these things were in space, as though things were spatially spread out, spatially side-by-side with other things, spatially near or far, etc. If you were not a human being, perhaps things would not appear to you to have spatial relationships, but because you are human, they do. Or, for another thing, you think of this paper as something which can be characterized by certain qualities; you say it is white and printed and smooth a though it were a subject having certain predicates, just as you regard the desk and the floor and yourself (a self which is interested or is engaged in reading or is tired) in the say way. Since a man is put together the way he is, he finds himself trying to understand things by thinking that some things, like paper, are related to other things, like whiteness and smoothness, as a substance is related to its qualities or properties. Human thinking makes these substance-quality connections just because it is human, and without such connections human beings supposedly could not think at all. Or again, if after scrutinizing this paper you are sure that it really is paper, then you are equally sure that it cannot *not* be paper. This is to say that, if a thing is what it is, then it simply is what it is, and it cannot at the same time be what it is not. If two-plus-two equals four, then it cannot also equal five. It may sound self-evident and even silly to so much as mention this, but perhaps it sounds this way only because this is one of the most fundamental ways, or the only way, in which human beings can think at all. Or, finally, suppose that the print on this page should suddenly become dim and blurred. What might you do in such a situation? You might blink your eyes and rub them to check whether the dimness of the print might not be attributed to some deficiency in your vision, or you might take off your glasses and re-examine them, or you might wonder what could have gone wrong in the original printing process. In any case, what you are doing is this: you are looking for a cause, for a reason. And if in this case, you could not discover a cause, you would say: “I don’t *understand* this.” You proceed that way – namely, to regard some things as symptoms or effects of certain other things which are their causes, as things which require certain explanatory reasons – because it is your nature as a human being to proceed that way. This or something like this, I am suggesting, is what Brunner’s form of Kantianism would lead him to say. In order for a man to know or understand anything at all, he must, precisely because he is a man, understand in certain given ways. Things must be perceived to be spatial, relatable as substance-quality, as cause-effect, as subject to the law of identity, or the law of non-contradiction, etc. These are the basic, universal thought forms and categories which are “immanent” in man’s very nature. And his nature, so defined and prescribed, is the “circle” within which alone he can operate and beyond which he cannot reach without pretending to be other than human.

But man, being the sinner that he is, does make precisely such pretension when he applies the immanent categories of his understanding where they do not properly apply at all: namely, to God and to other persons. It is true of course, that every person is to some extent also capable of being known in terms of these categories. You and I – just as the paper in front of you – can be understood in some measure as existing in space, as substances possessing certain necessary qualities, as having our existence and activity defined by the laws of logic, as being impelled by causes and explainable by reasons; and perhaps it is even possible in some small measure to understand God this way (though only, Brunner would insist, analogically). However, even after a person has been reduced in such manner to intelligible form, there is still a something about him which escapes such reduction, a certain plus, an inexhaustible surd, which *transcends* the categories of human reason. We may understand a great many things, even a great many true things, about, say, Martin Luther, but to understand him thus, we admit, is not the same as really knowing him personally. Similarly, even after a man may understand intellectually that “God is a Redeemer,” he may still not be able to say, “God is *my* Redeemer.”¹² Knowledge about God is not yet acquaintance with God; believing about God is not yet believing in God. Man, not because he is a sinner, but simply because he is man, just is not equipped to achieve a genuine intellectual apprehension of the living God. The finite categories which are immanent in human understanding, however capable they may be in other theaters of operation, are not made to grasp the transcendent meaning of God. While Brunner fixes tenaciously upon this absolute separation between God’s “transcendence” and man’s “immanence,” he describes the separation, not in the traditional *spatial* terms of a “heaven above” and an “earth beneath,” of “nature” and “supernature,” but rather in the *epistemological* terms of the knowable and the unknowable.

If, therefore, we are to know God at all, He must break in upon our “circle of immanence” from beyond, and we must respond to Him in some way other than by understanding Him. This other way is faith. Faith is the humble willingness to accept God Himself without imposing on Him the immanent categories of our understanding, without insisting on reducing Him to an object of our thought, recognizing thereby that God, who is a sovereign and transcendent Thou, has come into intimate fellowship with us without for a moment ceasing to be a transcendent Thou. Faith, Brunner sometimes says, is trustful obedience. It is our decision trustingly to be obedient to the transcendent God rather than distrustingly to insist that He be obedient to the thought forms immanent to our finite human natures. By means of such trustful obedience, and only by means of it, can men apprehend and be apprehended by God’s revelation.

C. Revelation as Unique Event

Revelation, Brunner also says, comes to men in historical events, but in historical events which are absolutely unique and therefore unintelligible to natural human reason.¹³

¹² *The Divine-Human Encounter, op. cit.*, p. 139.

¹³ *Revelation and Reason, op. cit.*, pp. 370-371.

What evidently lies in the back of Brunner's mind at this point is an age-old philosophical question which asks: How is it possible to know that which is singular or individual? When, for example, you look at the page in front of you, you recognize it be to a page only because you have previous experience of other pages in the past. You say to yourself: This object before me is like those other objects in the past which were called pages, therefore this object, too, must be a page. If, however, you had never had such previous experience of other pages, then you would not know that this object here and now is a page. This object would, in that case, be for you completely unique, singular, individual. You would have no other similar objects with which to compare it, and so you could never know what it is. It would be completely meaningless. But surely, you say, it would mean *something* to you. Could you not, for example, at least recognize that it is "white" and "smooth" and "printed" and "rectangular?" Not unless whiteness and smoothness and all the rest had been known to you in some prior cognition. Only if you had cognized whiteness before, could you *recognize* it when you encounter it now. Conversely, if you experience some object or happening which you have never, never experienced before, not even in a previous existence, as Socrates might suggest, not by way of innate ideas, then it would simply be impossible (or so it would seem) for you to recognize what this experience, here and now, means. It would be unintelligible, meaningless. It is evidently events and experiences like this which Brunner designates as "unique" or *einmalig*. And those events which are unique absolutely, he would say, are incapable of being understood by natural human reason.

The only events, however, Brunner would say, which are unique absolutely and without qualification are the events in which God discloses Himself to me through His Mediator: the events, that is of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the ensuing events in which this Mediator encounters believers in the Church through His Holy Spirit. These may properly be described as "events," for they happen in time and space just as any other historical events, like the Battle of Waterloo or like your reading of this journal. But they differ from other historical events in that they are entirely unique and singular. They have no counterpart whatsoever in general human experience. When God personally disclosed Himself to men in Jesus Christ in first century Palestine, there was no precedent in the whole of human history with which man could compare this utterly novel experience; and so men were not at all capable of discerning what it meant – by means of their natural reason, for natural reason cannot make sense of what is absolutely unique. Likewise, when this same God addresses Himself to believers, through His Holy Spirit, in second century Rome or twelfth-century Gaul or twentieth-century America, they cannot by their natural reason recognize what this experience means by comparing it with some similar event in ordinary human experience, as they do for example when they recognize a page or whiteness or smoothness; for there simply is no event in ordinary human experience which compares with or resembles this coming of the Holy Spirit. This coming is entirely *einmalig*, and human reason is utterly at a loss to understand it.

Nevertheless, no matter how unique these events may be, some human beings do manage to understand them and grasp their significance: those human beings, that is, who are believers; for if there were no understanding, no meaning, to accompany these events, they could hardly be called the "events of *revelation*." And we shall see

in the next paragraph how Brunner attempts to make this point clear. However, before we pass on to that point, we ought to remind ourselves how persistently Brunner has emphasized that revelation is the work of a wholly transcendent God and is not at all the product of the finite, creaturely human reason. This recurrent contrast between transcendence and immanence seems to be at least one of his dominant motifs. It appeared first in his insistence that revelation, since it is an encounter between persons, cannot be apprehended by human understanding, for human understanding can deal only with impersonal things. We noted the same theme in his saying that revelation is not humanly intelligible, since God is not subject to the categories which are immanent in man's reason. And now, finally, Brunner says the same thing in another way: since man is incapable of understanding that which is unique or singular, and since God's self-revelation appears in events which are unique absolutely, therefore revelation cannot be apprehended by natural human knowledge. In fact, so rigorously has Brunner held divine revelation to be beyond the grasp of rational understanding that some of his critics fear he is forced, finally, to fall back upon a kind of irrational religious experience (cf. his view of faith and personal encounter), which smacks dangerously of "mysticism" and enthusiasm and which therefore cannot rightfully be said to yield any intelligible content, any understanding—but only feeling.

D. Revelation as a "Word"

By way of counteracting this danger of irrationalism in his theology of revelation, Brunner asserts that revelation always comes as a "Word;" that is, to those who receive it in faith it is not a meaningless experience, but rather it makes sense, it has an understandable significance.¹⁴

One of the specters that has always haunted Emil Brunner is Schleiermacher, and it is a specter which Brunner has tried vehemently to exorcise. Against "*die Mystik*" he has consistently opposed "*das Wort*." Brunner, however, does not intend this Word to be identical with the Scriptures, for no scripture, no collection of concepts and words – as we saw earlier – is able to exhaust the meaning of the divine-human encounter, is able to be the revelation itself.¹⁵ But at the same time Brunner is just as eager to point out that the revelation, while it may not be identical with concepts and words, is nevertheless very closely bound up with them. Revelation, he insists, is not mystical experience, it is not some vague, inexplicable religious feeling. When God addresses us in His revelation, He does say something. Believers can point to the revelation and can note that it says this and not that. And what it says is conceptualized in the thoughts of Apostles and Prophets and believers and is expressed linguistically in Scriptures and creeds and prayers and theological doctrines. While these Scriptures and doctrines cannot be said to *be* the revelation, still there is no revelation *apart* from them. "Ohne die Lebre is die Sache nicht da." These conceptual and linguistic symbols of the Scriptures and of theology are not, as Brunner would understand Schleiermacher to have said, merely arbitrary, poetic imagery for symbolizing an inchoate religious feeling. Rather has this revelation occurred in historical events which, no matter how unique they may have been, or

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 416ff.

¹⁵ *The Divine-Human Encounter, op. cit.*, p. 24.

how personal, were yet capable of being interpreted in speech and in writing. In one of his attacks upon mysticism, it is precisely because “faith in Christ is permanently bound up with those objective facts, with this Book, and with this historical fact” that Brunner feels justified in concluding: “There is no fundamental distinction between faith and theology, as there is between mystical religiosity and theology.”¹⁶ This is so since revelation has always the character of Word. Just as words are vehicles for communicating meaning between man and man, so also does divine revelation in its role as Word communicate meaning between God and man. The Word of revelation is revelation in its meaningfulness, in its logical significance.

But Brunner himself, in spite of his insistence on revelation’s logical meaningfulness, does seem to sense that this insistence raises some difficulties in the light of some of his other, contrary statements. Since he does not always bother to spell out these difficulties, perhaps we should do. If, for instance, divine revelation is essentially a relationship between persons who cannot be reduced to impersonal abstractions in thought, and yet if this personal revelation must be subsequently expressed in just such impersonal abstractions as Scripture and dogma, how is this opposition between personal revelation and impersonal idea to be resolved? Or, if God transcends absolutely the categories which are immanent in our understanding, requiring for our response to Him a faith which is not an act of our intellect, then how shall we explain the connection (which Brunner believes to exist) between this absolutely transcendent God and our ideas about Him – e.g. our idea about Him as “Person?” If the statement “God is a Person” can be said to be at all true, even if it is only true analogically, then the human concept “person” may be said to be in some sense applicable to Him. But if it is in any sense applicable to Him, then He does not transcend it absolutely. Or if the revelatory events are unique – not relatively unique like ordinary historical events, but absolutely unique – and if absolutely unique events are as such unknowable, then how is it that they do yet yield a meaning which can be known, and which, when stated in theological propositions, can be said to be true? Here Brunner, borrowing from Kierkegaard, makes the interesting suggestion that the meaning and the truth of the event are apprehended, not by comparing this event to other, similar events (for there are no other, similar events), but simply by personally participating in the event itself. When I respond to this historical Jesus Christ *in faith*, the full implications of what He means and is, despite His absolute uniqueness and singularity, become intelligible to me. But apart from His “happening to me,” there is for me neither meaning nor truth. As Brunner says: This truth which happens – “*gewordene Wahrheit*.” But while all this may be profoundly true, it solves Brunner’s difficulty, I believe, only apparently, only by an inept confusion of the word “truth.”¹⁶ When he says, at first, that an absolutely unique event cannot be made to yield “truth,” he is speaking of a kind of theoretical truth which attaches to logical propositions – the appropriate relationship, in other words, between a proposition and the object to which it refers. But when he speaks of the “truth which happens,” he is referring to the appropriate relationship, not between logical propositions and intelligible objects, but between one Person and another person, which he elsewhere calls faith. It may be entirely proper to employ the word truth in both these senses, and perhaps in some other senses besides, but once that is done it is

¹⁶ *Revelation and Reason, op. cit.*, p. 362 ff., esp. pp. 369-370.

no longer admissible to use the word as though it always meant the same thing. These are some of the difficulties in which Brunner is involved by his attempting to conceive revelation, on the one hand, as personal and absolutely transcendent and unique, and on the other hand, as intelligible “Word.” Some of these difficulties he himself acknowledges. His answer, at one point, is:

We will allow the mystery – in all reverence –
to remain a mystery; but that does not exempt
us from the necessity of making an effort to
understand as much of it as we can.¹⁷

While such candor and humility are commendable indeed, it does seem that the “mystery” of which Brunner here speaks and which he regards with “reverence” is, partly at least, a mystery of his own making. And when, in his famous lectures at the Lutheran University of Upsala, he faces this same problem and suggests that the divine, personal, transcendent, unique revelation may be “in, with, and under” the concepts and words – as Christ is related sacramentally to the bread and wine¹⁸ - it does then seem that Brunner, for all his candor, has attributed to his own self-made difficulties a dignity and mystery which they do not quite deserve.

II. A Critical Estimate

A. An Entangling Alliance with Philosophy

The “mystery” which plagues Brunner’s theology of revelation may well turn out to be, upon further examination, a mystery which derives not so much from the complex, ineffable nature of revelation itself as from the peculiarly *philosophical* way in which Brunner has stated his problem. To be sure, there is mystery aplenty connected with the Christian doctrine of revelation. But this is not the mystery which Brunner here has on his hands. Rather, it seems, he has allowed himself to become entangled in a problem which concerns, not primarily the knowledge of revelation and faith, but human knowledge generally. And he has accepted at face value, more or less, the formulation which this problem has assumed in a particular philosophical tradition.

The questions, for example: “How do we know persons?” and “How may such interpersonal knowledge be reconciled with our knowledge of non-personal things?” are questions which, far from being peculiar to Christian theology, have perhaps received just as much, and more, attention from non-theological philosophers and psychologists. This in itself, of course, need not prevent theologians from also entering into the discussion, so long as they bear in mind that the problem is not restricted to the issue of Christian revelation. But it is precisely at this point that Brunner has erred. He has fixed upon the general epistemological distinction between personal and non-personal knowledge; and noting the technical difficulties which philosophy has had in accounting for the former, he concludes that this philosophically inexplicable knowledge of persons is peculiar to divine revelation and is the proper subject matter of Christian theology and ethics. And from this he has gone on to say, in effect, that the transcendent God is transcendent, at least partly, *because* He is a person. (This is certainly different from saying that God

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

¹⁸ *The Divine-Human Encounter, op. cit.*, pp. 109-113.

transcends our knowledge somewhat *like* persons do.) One practical implication of this would be that if the non-theological sciences would ever succeed in adumbrating some of the difficulties of interpersonal knowledge (which Brunner would probably have to deny *in principle*), then God's transcendence would to that extent be impaired. And for that matter might it not be possible, even now already, to construe the peculiar situation of interpersonal knowledge in such a way that we arrive at a conclusion which is directly opposed to Brunner's? Might we not conclude that an impersonal thing like a tree, because it is not a person, is not *less* transcendent of our understanding, but *more* transcendent – for a tree, since it does not have the personal power to communicate its inner being to me, can never, never, be known by me, whereas a person can at least decide to communicate himself to me. However, apart from the merits of such a suggestion, it seems that Brunner has inadvisably left the fate and fortune of his theology of revelation in the hands of the philosophers. (Which is precisely what he wants most of all not to do.) And what has been said about his undue dependence on philosophy with respect to the knowledge of persons applies equally well to the knowledge of unique historical events and to the experience of things which transcend the immanent categories of our understanding.

B. Misplaced Emphasis on Divine Transcendence

But an even more serious shortcoming in Brunner's doctrine of revelation is one which is not philosophical, but distinctly theological. It is a shortcoming, in fact, which attaches to his view of the entire God-man relationship and to his view of sin and salvation, and it extends its weakening influence, therefore, beyond the doctrine of revelation, throughout Brunner's whole theological system. This shortcoming consists, briefly, in his misplaced Reformed emphasis on the absolute separation between finite, creaturely man and the wholly other, sovereign God. It should not be thought for a moment that such an emphasis on God's sovereign transcendence is unimportant for Christian theology; on the contrary, it is exceedingly important, especially today when theologians seem to be continually tempted to forget it. The difficulty in Brunner's theology, however, is that this emphasis on God's transcendence is misplaced; it is given such a precedence and predominance over other cardinal doctrines (like the doctrine of God's justifying grace) that these doctrines lose their characteristic genius and power. Not the least of these doctrines to be so affected is Brunner's doctrine of revelation.

Our previous discussion has sufficiently shown us that Brunner's notion of revelation is cast, from beginning to end, in terms of transcendence-immanence. Because this revelation is an encounter between persons, because it is not intelligible to man in his circle of immanence, because it is mediated in events which are entirely unique, because even in its character as meaningful Word it is a mystery, it is, throughout, a revelation to us from a God who is wholly other. And man's chief sin, in the face of this revelation, is accordingly his proud unwillingness to accept his finitude, his creatureliness, and his desire to diminish the transcendent majesty of the wholly other God. Sinful man atrophies into an abstract "it" the God who is a sovereign, personal "Thou." He subjects to the categories of his own understanding the God who has created that understanding and who eludes its grasp altogether. He regards the absolutely unique events of revelation as but particular instances of a

general revelation which is going on always and everywhere. He identifies God's Word with the words of men or loses it in his own mystical religiosity. And, finally, the most marvelous aspect of this divine revelation is that in it the great divide between God and man, which is *ex hypothesi* unbridgeable, is miraculously bridged – a paradoxical contradiction of the logical and ontological law: *Finitum non capax infiniti*.

Brunner's concern, in his doctrine of revelation, is of course not *only* with the matter of transcendence-immanence. As he frequently says, he is opposing a dynamic view of revelation to a static, intellectualistic view, a faith-centered and history-centered revelation to an all-knowing, unhistorical philosophical idealism, a Word of revelation to an irrational mysticism. But each of these emphases, it will be noted, sponsors in turn Brunner's larger emphasis on God's sovereign transcendence. It may seem strange to raise this charge against the Brunner who is so widely known for his own criticisms of Barth's extreme doctrine of transcendence. But while Brunner has, in his own theology, modified Barth's extremism (in a way which, for all its theological and philosophical ineptitude, seems more honest than Barth's), still these very modifications have consistently centered in, and been shaped by, the selfsame problem of transcendence and immanence.

This, as was suggested earlier, is an eccentric placing of emphasis, and it obscures the central motif of the Christian message: God's justifying and forgiving grace. This is not to suggest that Brunner means to minimize this motif – far from it! – nor, for that matter, that the doctrine of justification can be maintained without ample room for God's transcendent holiness. However, a theology which directs first attention to the doctrine of "justification by faith through grace alone" tends also to regard such matters as sin, salvation, and revelation differently than Brunner. If such a theology does still speak of pride as man's root sin, it is not so much the pride of a man who attempts arrogantly to surmount his own finitude, but rather it is the pride of a man who wills above all to be pious and thus to be worthy of God's acceptance. And when such a theology marvels at the miracle of salvation, it discovers God's deep love, not so much as His deigning to overcome His "transcendence" to disclose Himself to us in our "immanence" (which of course is marvelous indeed), but rather in His desisting from the legal demands and judgment which are our just desert and in His sacrificially, mercifully, forgiving our sins. And when such a "justification by grace" theology discusses revelation, it is not first distracted by the metaphysically oriented questions: How can the finite possibly contain the infinite? How can the sacramental bread possibly contain the Lord's body? How can the absolutely unique possibly be known? How can the words possibly contain the Word? Such a theology makes short shrift of these questions by replying, perhaps almost flippantly, that these apparent impossibilities are indeed possible – "in, with and under." For the realm of the possible is defined not simply by what general human experience has found to be possible, but quite nominalistically, by what God has actually willed and done. And this can be said without either flattening out the metaphysical mysteries involved (as Fundamentalism would do) or deliberately flouting all rules of consistency, for the "first truth" of Christian theology, with which pre-eminently all other theological truths must be consistent, is that God, who is above all a God of love, does through His Son enter into the world and come very near to us.

