

# The Personal Imperative of Revelation: Emil Brunner, Dogmatics and Theological Existence

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## Abstract

Based on the theology of Emil Brunner, this article seeks to demonstrate the relevance, even the imperative nature, of personal encounter both for the work of dogmatics and for theological existence. In particular it assesses what impact the personalness of God's self-revelation should have, not just on one's doctrinal conclusions, but also on one's self as a theologian. A range of Brunner's writings forms the backdrop for this focused study of a paradigm which shapes his theology and methodology: personal encounter.

I start by introducing the broader context of Brunner's presuppositions about the theological task, including his regard for divine self-communication. With this in mind, attention will be paid to the relationship between revelation and scripture, and in particular to the Christocentric, personal and enduring character of God's unveiling. Brunner's regard for the apostolic witness as the authoritative testimony to God's full disclosure in Christ is high and determines the position that he affords the Bible throughout his work.

A summary of Brunner's treatment of the divine-human encounter will follow, with a view to understanding him on this subject in his own terms. His small publication by the same name, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, serves as the focus of this examination. The term 'personal correspondence' requires special consideration for the central position it enjoys in Brunner's conception of divine revelation and its relationship to dogmatics. Further expressions related to this theme will come to light in the process of answering two questions regarding the connection between personal encounter in scripture and the work of theology. First, how true is our doctrine when its expression becomes distanced from the language of divine-human encounter which characterises revelation? Second, what is the relationship between scripture as theology's primary source and the ongoing revelation of God to the believer in personal encounter?

The suggestion that theology cannot be restricted to intellectual pursuit will not be universally applauded, but the proposal that God's self-unveiling obliges a change in existence and not just an adjustment in knowledge is one that Brunner deems unavoidable. In this light I conclude by suggesting that the personal encounter of revelation issues an imperative for both individual and communal existence which must be considered by all who undertake the theological task.

**Keywords:** Brunner, dogmatics, encounter, existence, revelation, scripture.

## Introduction

Emil Brunner is a theologian who has been infrequently studied in recent decades and, when he is mentioned, it is most often in relation to other theologians or as a counterpoint to this or that theological position.<sup>1</sup> It is the premise of this article, however, that Brunner's work is worth understanding in its own right and has value for contemporary theology. Towards this end it is my goal to expound a dominant theme of Brunner's thinking as it relates to dogmatics: the divine–human encounter of faith.<sup>2</sup> I open with an overview of Brunner's interpretation of divine revelation, drawn largely from *The Christian Doctrine of God*.<sup>3</sup> In the sections which follow I focus on the event of 'truth as encounter' and its impact on the task of theology, particularly as it is testified to in scripture and discussed in dogmatics. This exposition is guided by two queries. (1) How true is our doctrine when its expression becomes distanced from the language of divine–human interaction which characterises revelation? (2) What is the relationship between scripture as theology's primary source and the ongoing revelation of God to the believer in personal encounter? By way of conclusion I indicate two imperatives of the divine–human encounter for theological existence.

Of particular importance for this study is Brunner's small text, *The Divine–Human Encounter*,<sup>4</sup> though other sources will be noted as they corroborate and substantiate its thesis. *Encounter* is the published compilation of lectures given by Brunner in 1937, in full flow of his career as theologian, speaker and

<sup>1</sup> One need not look far for illustrations of Brunner used as antagonist, however justifiably or unjustifiably so: e.g. Mark J. McInroy, 'Karl Barth and Personalist Philosophy: A Critical Appropriation', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64/1 (2011), p. 53. Instances of overlooking Brunner, even where he might be relevant to the subject at hand, are likewise available, such as a comprehensive and detailed critique of narrative theology with not one reference to Brunner therein: Francesca Aran Murphy, *God is Not a Story: Realism Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> The aim of this article is primarily expository and not critical, though I am well aware of the usual arguments against Brunner which render him suspect for many theologians (e.g. certain interpretations of Brunner's comments on natural theology or his perceived reliance on personalist philosophy). It is my view that a rigorous study of his work must be achieved afresh before dated critiques of Brunner can be adequately sustained in current debate.

<sup>3</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics*, vol. 1, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949; German edn. 1946).

<sup>4</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, trans. Amandus W Loos (London: SCM Press, 1944). The German title, *Wahrheit als Begegnung* (1938), has been alternatively translated as *Truth as Encounter*. Both English renditions point to the single theme of the text and, it could be said, of Brunner's theology: we know God in personal encounter.

teacher. Three elements are of note about this book at the outset. One, it expresses Brunner's consistent reference to scripture as the source and norm of theological expression. Two, it defends his rejection of the object–subject antithesis as an inadequate paradigm by which to understand the truth of God. When it comes to divine revelation, Brunner claims, the question, 'What is truth and how do we know it?' must be replaced with a more vital and relevant question, 'How is knowing related to being?'<sup>5</sup> Finally, *Encounter* illustrates Brunner's appreciation of dogmatics and his desire to reorientate theology back towards the biblical witness to God's self-communication in Jesus Christ.

### Revelation and the written word

Throughout his work Brunner retains an unswerving commitment to the reality of God's revelation in Christ, as testified to in scripture. He begins with the premise that revelation is 'a process, an event, and indeed an event which happens to us and in us'.<sup>6</sup> God's self-unveiling becomes revelation when it is met with faith in the subject through the testimony of the Holy Spirit in the inner being. This is the occasion of revelation which takes place in the divine–human encounter. Such encounter is realised in the twofold happening: of divine choice personally to address an individual, be it Moses or David, Mary or Paul, you or me; and of the faith response of the person in submission to the word of the Lord.<sup>7</sup>

Scripture, according to Brunner, is the authoritative testimony to this divine address. This tenet has two important implications. To begin with, we do not understand God's self-communication apart from the testimony of the written word. It is this book above and beyond all other witnesses which testifies to God's self-unveiling to humankind. What follows is that the Bible does not possess axiomatic authority as revelation in and of itself. Its authority is found rather in its singular subject, Jesus Christ, who remains the

<sup>5</sup> The noteworthy influence of Søren Kierkegaard is easily and rightly identified here; however, although it plays a role in the broader study of Brunner's work underlying these pages, its particular significance surpasses the breadth of this article.

<sup>6</sup> Brunner, *Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pp. 19–20.

<sup>7</sup> 'In the New Testament faith is the relation between person and person, the obedient trust of man in the God who graciously stoops to meet him. Here revelation is "truth as encounter," and faith is knowledge as encounter'. Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: SCM Press, 1947; German edn, 1941), p. 9. Also readily detectable is Buber's I–Thou paradigm, of which Brunner makes much throughout his work: Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1970). Word limit, however, inhibits a substantial treatment of Buber's work from being made here.

revelation of God.<sup>8</sup> From this understanding flows Brunner's interpretation of revelation as Christocentric, personal and ongoing.

*Christocentric*

Along with Luther, Brunner argues for the instrumental authority of scripture.<sup>9</sup> The Bible serves as the authoritative testimony for faith because through it we know God's self-revelation in personal encounter with the Son. 'We are not required to believe the Scriptures because they are the Scriptures', argues Brunner, 'but because Christ, whom I am convinced in my conscience is the Truth, meets me in the Scriptures – therefore I believe.'<sup>10</sup> It is through the biblical witness that one encounters Jesus as the Christ, by faith.

Engagement with the written word is fundamental to knowing Jesus Christ, for we would remain ignorant of him if it were not for the apostles' primary witness to the risen Christ. It is for this reason that the Bible, and its unifying subject, Jesus Christ, remains the single standard for dogmatics. 'Christian doctrine can only legitimately make this unconditional claim to Truth in so far as it is based upon revelation. Thus its basis becomes its criterion and its norm.'<sup>11</sup> Brunner specifically identifies the threefold root of theology – polemics, catechesis and exegesis – as dependent on the biblical witness.<sup>12</sup> He also reminds us that, at every point in the salvation story, the divine–human relationship remains God's prerogative, with redemption being entirely God's initiative and never humankind's achievement. God remains Lord of his revelation – past, present and future.

*Personal*

The context in which God makes himself known, Brunner insists, is the concrete events of human history. God's address to human beings 'is not a timeless or static relation, arising from the world of ideas. . . . God "steps"

<sup>8</sup> Brunner, *Dogmatics*, vol. 1, p. 45. Brunner discusses various forms in which God communicates his word to us; see Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1939; German edn, 1937), pp. 67–8.

<sup>9</sup> Specifically in relation to Luther, Brunner distinguishes between instrumental authority and the formal authority attached to the doctrine of verbal inspiration; see Brunner, *Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pp. 107–13. Also, Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, pp. 181–2.

<sup>10</sup> Brunner, *Dogmatics*, vol. 1, p. 110. 'The revelation can only be received in [Jesus Christ], and not merely through Him. He Himself is the revelation, as He Himself is the Word; He is what God has to say to us.' Emil Brunner, *The Mediator*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1934; German edn, 1927), p. 270.

<sup>11</sup> Brunner, *Dogmatics*, vol. 1, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93ff. For his explanation of this threefold root of the theological task, see Brunner, *Encounter*, p. 11.

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.<sup>13</sup> Spatiotemporal existence is the realm – the only realm – in which we know the divine self-communication.

Brunner has in view here the problem of the object–subject antithesis and its incongruence with theological knowledge. He insists that ‘where the heart of faith is concerned – the relation between God’s Word and faith, between Christ and faith – the Object–Subject correlation must be replaced by one of an entirely different kind’.<sup>14</sup> God does not make himself known through objective, scientific methodologies, nor does God communicate himself through wholesale spiritual experience or moral philosophy.<sup>15</sup> God’s concern is the kind of understanding which transforms the existence of the knower as the result of personal interface with himself.<sup>16</sup>

We come, thus, to the personal encounter of faith with the risen Christ as testified to in the apostolic witness. ‘The Bible says nothing of a God as He is in Himself and nothing of man as he is in himself, but only of a God who from the first is related to man and of a man who from the first is related to God, and, indeed, in such a way that in this relation God is incontrovertibly the first, man incontrovertibly the second.’<sup>17</sup> All human beings experience knowledge of God in a personal, historical context, most definitively in Jesus Christ. The authoritative reference we have to that event is scripture, apart from which we cannot know God as he has revealed himself.

### *Ongoing*

Brunner goes on to include a third element of revelation alongside its Christocentric and personal character. The third feature, which ties these first two together, is revelation’s ongoing nature. Revelation is not a phenomenon frozen in time; rather, Brunner contends, the same God who spoke through

<sup>13</sup> Brunner, *Encounter*, p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>15</sup> All sources save divine revelation ultimately fail to tell us who God is, because ‘the rational God is the God whom I construct for myself; the revealed God is the God who speaks to me’. Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, pp. 242–3. Also Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative: A Study in Christian Ethics*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1937; German edn, 1932), p. 50; and Brunner, *Mediator*, pp. 105–14.

<sup>16</sup> As Reidar Hauge notes, ‘This knowledge, therefore, is to be distinguished from ordinary knowledge in three ways. It does not make us masters over that which is known. It does not leave us unchanged. Nor does it render us solitary as all other knowledge necessarily does’. Reidar Hauge, ‘Truth as Encounter’, in Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (eds), *The Theology of Emil Brunner* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 142.

<sup>17</sup> Brunner, *Encounter*, p. 40.

the law and the prophets and conclusively in Jesus Christ still speaks today. This is the heart of the divine–human encounter. ‘This two-sided but unambiguous relation, this state of the dependent–independent creature – to be face to face with God according to His Will – is the fundamental category of the Bible; and in relation to it everything said in the Bible is said and must be understood.’<sup>18</sup> God continues to communicate God’s self as the Holy Spirit speaks to the believing heart through the personal encounter of faith and through the written word.

These three characteristics of God’s self-revelation compel Brunner to treat the written word as the indispensable criterion of dogmatics. ‘The source and norm of all Christian theology is the Bible. Its subject matter is the secret and, at the same time, manifest meaning of the Bible: the God who inclines Himself towards man and makes Himself present to man: Jesus Christ and His Kingdom.’<sup>19</sup>

### Dogmatics and the divine–human encounter

If Brunner so confidently regards scripture as authoritative testimony to divine revelation, how, then, does he view the task of theology, which necessarily goes beyond the biblical text? His estimation of dogmatics is clearly an optimistic one: ‘because God has revealed Himself there can be, and is, sound Christian doctrine’.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, however, he accepts that theology does not always use biblical language or treat in the same manner as scripture the questions with which it deals.

This brings us to our first question: how true is doctrinal discourse when it becomes distanced from the divine–human encounter which characterises revelation? How can our work as theologians reflect revelation when it abandons the personal conversation with God for its exegetic, catechetical or polemic purposes? Can the second-person, I–Thou conversation of faith be genuinely reflected in the third-person statements of doctrine? Brunner posits that because doctrinal language necessarily differs in form from the largely narrative language of the Bible, we need to monitor to what extent

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30. ‘The will of God, which alone is Good, is made known to us in His action, in His revelation. The Divine process of revelation, however, is not only present, nor is it only past; in fact, it is present, based on the past. We know God through His present speech – in the Holy Scriptures. He is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever, and this not only in what He gives but also in what He demands. But in His historical revelation He has made Himself known to us as the Creator and Redeemer. Thus in this unity of His revelation He is the God of the Bible, the God who is revealed to us in Jesus Christ.’ Brunner, *Divine Imperative*, p. 122.

<sup>20</sup> Brunner, *Dogmatics*, vol. 1, p. 43.

the former is consistent with, or diverges from, the latter if scripture is to remain theology's criterion.

*The term defined: personal correspondence*

As Brunner sees it, scripture attests to God's self-revelation only within the context of human history. Holy writ offers no discussion of God-in-himself,<sup>21</sup> but only the record of God as he relates to humankind. 'God is the God who approaches man and man is the man who comes from God.'<sup>22</sup> The narrative language of scripture reflects this personal, divine-human interface in so far as 'the thought of the Bible is not substantial, neuter or abstract, but verbal, historical and personal'.<sup>23</sup> This is the precise character of the written testimony to revelation, and theological talk of God in any other terms runs the risk of violating scripture as its source and norm. When this happens, it is not long before dogmatics begins to consider God in terms that the biblical text does not use.

In other words, 'God's Word does not speak "something"' that we objectively possess as truth. Instead, in personal address God meets the human being: 'God himself speaks to myself'.<sup>24</sup> This decisive experience with God is what Brunner calls the *event of personal correspondence*. '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 when His love is known in responding love.'<sup>25</sup> Faith accordingly becomes the positive participation in relationship with God through Christ, leading to transformation of the knower, and no longer can be maintained as passive assent to objective statements about God. This personal correspondence is the correlation between God as Lord and the believer who responds in faith.<sup>26</sup>

*The problem identified: the epistemological problem of truth*

If this is the essence of the divine-human interface, a problem is readily identified: how do we accurately discuss *knowledge* of God without diminishing its personalness and particularity? Brunner calls this the 'epistemological

<sup>21</sup> The original phrase, *Gott-an-Sich*, becomes a specific term for Brunner; Brunner, *Encounter*, p. 88.

<sup>22</sup> *Gott-zum Menschen-hin* and *Menschen-von-Gott-her* likewise become specific terms for Brunner; *ibid.*, pp. 44, 31; also Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, p. 47.

<sup>23</sup> Brunner, *Encounter*, p. 32.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57. God draws near to men and women in personal address, and they in turn respond to his Lordship in an act of submission and faith. This is the divine-human encounter in which truth as personal correspondence is known.

problem of truth' which faces the theologian.<sup>27</sup> It is the negative relation between the biblical witness to truth as personal encounter and the general concept of truth as objectively substantiated.

An 'abyss' results from the difference 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 in the third person'.<sup>28</sup> Peter, for example, clearly used different language in preaching about the Christ after the ascension than he did in speaking directly with Jesus during his ministry.<sup>29</sup> The 'he' language of the kerygma replaces the 'I-you' language of personal discourse.<sup>30</sup> Two thousand years later, Brunner posits, our experience of interaction with the Lord is similar. We know Jesus in the personal experience of faith, expressed in the language of 'you, Lord', while we also speak about him as 'him, the Lord' in our teaching, preaching and evangelism.

This shift in theological discourse is critical for dogmatics, from first-person encounter with Christ as Lord to the credal affirmation of the apostolic testimony. Brunner's identification of this 'epistemological problem of truth' is not his alone. His concern is, though, that this so-called abyss can powerfully if surreptitiously sequester, not only the language we use in theology, but more importantly how we understand the personal nature of God's self-revelation as well as the presence of faith in our response. Unchecked, this dichotomy can undermine everything from the theologian's personal prayer to the authenticity of her public teaching.

*The theologian's burden outlined: scientific thinker and believer*

The issue for the theologian is clear. If dogmatics is to achieve its end of explaining, teaching and defending God's self-revelation, then a shift in language, from the second person to the third person, is unavoidable. Brunner suggests that the 'epistemological problem of truth' consequently becomes the 'theologian's burden': the doubleness of being both a scientific thinker and a believer at the same time.<sup>31</sup>

Brunner identifies two kinds of articulation – personal and non-personal – which result from this tension between scientific thinking and faith. On the

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>29</sup> Compare, for instance, Simon Peter's declaration (Matt 16:16), 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God', with his proclamation to the crowds at Pentecost (Acts 2:36), 'Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Jesus Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified'.

<sup>30</sup> One place where Brunner explains this shift is Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, p. 121.

<sup>31</sup> Brunner, *Encounter*, p. 58.



one hand lies the 'I believe' (*credo, credere, credidi, creditus*) of personal encounter, and on the other hand is found the *Credo* of corporate confession (e.g. *Credo in Deum Patrem omnipotentem*). The first element reflects the personal word that God addresses to each one as 'you'. It is consistent with the address of the divine word to human beings and the human response of obedience-in-faith.<sup>32</sup> The second component conveys the 'something' that God says to us in that address, the doctrine of what he tells us of himself. This becomes the declaration of faith adopted by those who respond to the Lord in personal encounter.

*Truth as encounter*

We are better positioned now to answer our question about the validity of theological claims when they become distanced from the particularity of divine-human encounter. Brunner's thesis highlights that the theologian communicates and remains faithful to biblical revelation in so far as she points to the personal address of the divine in the I-Thou relation. Scripture remains theology's source as the authoritative witness to God's word about himself.

Even though dogmatics refers to this personal revelation in language which goes beyond, and talks about, the I-Thou dialogue between God and his people,<sup>33</sup> it is accountable to the essential content of scripture as the record of God's self-unveiling in human history. Brunner again reiterates that neither scripture nor doctrine is the revelation. '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.'<sup>34</sup> The interaction of personal encounter between the Lord and the believer is the only way God is known.

Another way to state the relationship is, prayer is not the expression of dogmatics, yet dogmatics needs always to reference the interface between Lord and believer voiced in prayer. Prayer is the first order of I-Thou language and is the point at which God's self-revelation occurs. Brunner goes a step further to insist that dogmatics, though it does not use the first-person language of prayer, must always take place within the broader context of a faith response to Jesus as Lord, if it is to deal honestly with what God says about God's self.

<sup>32</sup> 'Obedience-in-faith' is the trans. for Brunner's term *Vertrauensgehorsam*, from *pistis*; *ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>33</sup> E.g. speaking about the doctrine of the Trinity; for further discussion, see Brunner, *Dogmatics*, vol. 1, ch. 16, 'The Triune God'.

<sup>34</sup> Brunner, *Encounter*, p. 79.

## Dogmatics and Jesus Christ

Our investigation is not finished, though. If we know God in personal encounter yet our theological discourse necessarily takes a form different to that of prayer, we need to ask, what is the relationship between scripture as theology's primary source and the ongoing revelation of God to the believer in personal encounter? What implications does this have for being as well as for doctrine?

### *The positive role of doctrine for faith*

Here Brunner identifies the positive role of doctrine for faith in so far as we understand the divine personal address and our response of faith by such means. 'Even as we previously said that the Word of God is not doctrine, that God in His Word does not speak "something true" but Himself, so now we must further ask: Does He not speak Himself to us in such a way that He tells us "something," "something true," so we must also further ask: Can this faith be consummated in any other way except that we believe "something" "which" God says to us?'<sup>35</sup>

The content of our belief about God is learnt through catechetical instruction or apologetic argument. Such enterprises employ categories of thought which go beyond those of scripture, while simultaneously remaining faithful to its substance. Brunner expounds:

Even though it is true . . . that all doctrine in the Bible means nothing else and points to nothing else than that God Himself addresses us in order that we ourselves may answer Him in faith, it must surely be conceded at the same time that this address and this response can take place only by virtue of Biblical *doctrine*. Between the Word of God and obedience-in-trust on the one hand and doctrine and faith in doctrine on the other there must thus obtain necessarily and not accidentally a positive relation in addition to the negative one.<sup>36</sup>

Theology has for its priority the work of exegesis, catechesis and polemics because the word of God cannot be fully comprehended apart from this

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

framework.<sup>37</sup> In fact, it is in the very speaking of God to human beings and in the hearing of faith that the content of theology is communicated.

Brunner remains consistent with both his high regard for the work of dogmatics and his faithfulness to scripture as its criterion. His point is that the word of God who is Jesus Christ cannot be grasped without the framework of theology. Doctrine, he suggests, has a sacramental relationship with the reality it represents, not just an instrumental one. The Lord's Prayer serves as a case in point.<sup>38</sup> Brunner suggests that even the most personal expression of the I–Thou interface, which is prayer, has its abstract form. The prayer regarded by the church as 'the prayer the Lord taught his disciples' is, in a sense, doctrine, but it can never be divorced from faith. The Lord's Prayer makes no sense, has no meaning and cannot sincerely be spoken apart from faith. This is the intimate and inextricable relationship between doctrine and faith, between faith and doctrine: 'we can never separate the abstract framework from the personal Presence contained in it'.<sup>39</sup>

*The central theme of scripture and its essential content*

Thus we see that content statements are necessary to convey the truth of revelation; but if taken alone, Brunner warns, they can lead to a dangerous objectivism. Faith is not a set of statements discerned by the church as 'the faith', to which one must adhere to obtain assurance of salvation. Instead, faith is the personal encounter with the risen Christ which results in submission to his Lordship.

Likewise, Brunner cautions, truth as encounter, if isolated, can lead to an exaggerated subjectivism. This extreme is no more consistent with divine self-revelation than is an objectivist trend, which is why the personal experience of faith is discerned through the necessary work of theology. There is a connection to be made here between the objective and the subjective, between doctrine and the I–Thou encounter. That connection is Jesus Christ, the word of God. 'In agreement with the whole Church', Brunner explains, 'we say that the Bible, the entire Holy Scriptures, is the Word of God. As in its totality it is event, so in its totality it is authority. But

<sup>37</sup> Does this mean that scripture is not sufficient to evoke a faith response to the Lordship of Christ? Certainly not. What is at stake here is the kind of conversation had from the earliest of church councils: scripture clearly testifies that Jesus is Lord, but what does that mean for our worship of one divine being? The concern is specifically identified with the unavoidable discussion of faith, which becomes necessary, if not before the moment of personal encounter, then subsequent to it.

<sup>38</sup> Brunner, *Encounter*, pp. 79–80.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

to this first assertion a second must at once be added. Not everything in the Scriptures stands in the same connection to the essential meaning.<sup>40</sup>

What is Brunner saying? The essential meaning of scripture is Jesus Christ, the historical self-revelation of God in human flesh. Everything in scripture is connected, in a more or less contiguous fashion, to the historical person and work of Christ and therein finds its authority. What matters in that relation, however, is not so much the specific narrative detail as the fulfilment of God's will which takes place through the word-become-flesh. In this 'doctrine' God tells us his plan for us. We conclude, therefore, that the relationship between the word of God and doctrine is twofold. Scripture's narrative serves to frame the essential meaning of the heart of Christian doctrine (God's self-revelation in Christ), and doctrine, similarly, is tested by its relation to the narrative. In this way scripture remains doctrine's measure of truth.

*The impossibility of faith as purely intellectual pursuit*

Even with this positive relationship, though, faith must remain 'a real happening which grips the whole person' and must avoid the orthodox-objective confusion between the word of God and doctrine.<sup>41</sup> God communicates himself to us in the Word, who is the Son of God. The incarnation is the full expression of this Word to human understanding, and it is in this self-communication that lordship and fellowship are made possible. Stated otherwise, God's self-communication cannot be known apart from fellowship with God in Christ.

This is the particular challenge of the theological task according to Brunner. Given the personal nature of God's self-communication, testified to in the written word and continued in the Spirit's freedom to speak, faith is never solely an intellectual pursuit. The tension between doctrine and personal encounter must be preserved, for when the former is isolated from the latter in the theologian's person and labour, then doctrine comes to resemble law, not gospel.<sup>42</sup>

It is the gospel, though, which promotes the obedience of trust. Doctrine apart from faith does not lead to God but to legalism, and legalism stifles the work of the Holy Spirit. One can believe in the Holy Spirit as a doctrine of the church while at the same time never receiving the Holy Spirit in

<sup>40</sup> E.g. the difference between (a) questions of accuracy of some of the geographical details of the synoptics and (b) the fact of Jesus' death; or (c) the list of greetings in Paul's letters as compared with (d) the veracity of his theological exposition and preaching; Brunner, *Encounter*, p. 81.

<sup>41</sup> Brunner, *Encounter*, p. 110.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

personal encounter with Jesus.<sup>43</sup> Brunner includes in this warning not only the professional theologian but also the pastor, recognising the modern shift 'from spiritual-personal to impersonal-intellectual, from genuinely churchly to scholastic'.<sup>44</sup> It is this compromise of the spiritual-personal and the genuinely ecclesial which Brunner wants to correct.

I return to my query about the relationship between scripture as theology's primary source and the ongoing revelation of God to its reader in personal encounter. The relation is twofold. One, scripture as God's word is the means through which we encounter the living God. And two, all that we have to say about God (i.e. doctrine) must be aligned with the essential content of the Bible (namely, Jesus Christ).

### Conclusion: the imperative of theological existence

We have considered the nature of revelation as the Christocentric, personal and ongoing encounter, which is testified to scripture. The truth of this divine self-unveiling is known only in the personal event of faith. The relationship between this divine-human encounter and the eventual doctrine which discusses, debates and teaches it is the correlation between the I-Thou event itself and the content of that event which is treated in the third person. This returns us to the suggestion in the introduction, that Brunner is less interested in how we define truth and more in how knowing is related to being. In this light, I suggest that imperative of revelation possesses two implications for theological existence.<sup>45</sup>

The first implication is personal. One cannot know God as God gives himself to be known in the divine-human encounter without submission to his Lordship in Christ. Such obedience leads to personal transformation.<sup>46</sup> Knowing God is not concluded in rational acquisition of truth-statements but leads to a whole new way of being. Doing theology, therefore, though

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>45</sup> I do not use 'theological existence' as a particular phrase here, though I recognise it has served as a specific referent in the past, such as Barth's influential *Theologische Existenz Heute*. My use of it is simply to indicate Brunner's valid insistence that personal encounter with God in Christ through the Spirit cannot but have an impact upon who we are as persons, whether we accept Christ as Lord or reject him. The influence of Kierkegaard is again felt here.

<sup>46</sup> Scripture's teaching on this is abundant: from Abram's call to leave his country, kindred and father's house to be transformed into a great nation by God (Gen 12); to the power of God's word to change the one who hears it (e.g. Ps 119); to Jesus' charge to the woman caught in adultery and, it could be said, to all who encounter him: 'Go and sin no more' (John 8:11).

preoccupied with right speaking about God according to his revelation, results in genuine theological existence – a transformed way of life. The theologian consequently is changed in her attitudes, choices and actions and not just in her intellectual pursuits or doctrinal definitions.

The second implication is corporate. Personal encounter with the living God through the Holy Spirit leads to fellowship, both with God and with other believers. Because the will of God revealed in scripture is community-focused as well as God-focused, the church remains a fellowship of disciples, not a school.<sup>47</sup> ‘Loving Him means to love mankind’, comments Brunner; ‘to be united to Him means to be united to man. His will is wholly a social will, a will for a people, for a community; therefore God recognizes no service of God which is not at the same time a service of man.’<sup>48</sup> It is in the context of such communion that we can say what we know about God, even as we together practise faith in him. Our work as theologians is none other than to remain in, and to communicate, this truth as a fellowship of disciples.

The relation between the individual, the communal and Jesus Christ completes its circle here. ‘The Church is therefore a magnitude to be understood as completely personal; it is the genuine correlate to the Word of God, which Jesus Christ Himself is.’<sup>49</sup> Personal correspondence is fulfilled in the perfect fellowship and communion of God with human beings in the consummation of all things, the full *apocalypsis* of his kingdom. This past, present and future revelation, which I have explored throughout these pages, is the subject matter of theology.

It is fitting to close with an image which is both a scriptural motif and a distinguishing feature of the church: the Lord’s Supper. In reference to the kingdom of God as expressed in a meal shared together, in the meal which will be shared in eternity, Brunner states that what is meant here is ‘direct intercourse with God and through Him with one another’.<sup>50</sup> This fellowship is possible when faith leads to personal encounter and when personal encounter undergirds, guides and results in theological doing and theological being. As we have seen, the will of God is expressed always in conjunction with a human response – the reply to a true understanding of the message of the gospel: for God so loved the world. This divine–human love encounter is not an additional element to God’s will but identical to it.

<sup>47</sup> Brunner, *Encounter*, p. 111.

<sup>48</sup> Brunner, *Divine Imperative*, p. 54.

<sup>49</sup> Brunner, *Encounter*, p. 117.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.