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THEOLOGICAL WORKS OF EMIL BRUNNER

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INTRODUCTION

Out of the failure of liberal optimism have arisen several theologians of contemporary significance. Among the most significant of these, and perhaps second only to Karl Barth, is Emil Heindrick Brunner. We have chosen his works because of their contemporary historical significance as well as their attempt to grapple with one of the basic problems of the ages--the relationship between revelation and reason for the Christian theologian. The following volumes have been read in the light of this purpose: Revelation and Reason (440 pp.), Natural Theology (128 pp.), Christianity and Culture (160 pp.), Man in Revolt (564 pp.) and The Mediator (624 pp.).

DEFINITIVE STATEMENT

The Intent of Brunner's Works.--By the author's own confession, he feels that the basic "task of our generation is to get back to a true theologia naturalis". It is for this reason that he and Karl Barth have turned from theological brothers to dogmatic sparing partners. Brunner is more of an apologist than a dogmatist. Since the church is the recipient of the supreme revelation in Christ Jesus and since it must relate this to the thinking of its generation, Brunner has felt it incumbent upon himself to undertake this exercise. In so doing, of course, he tackles the basic problem as to the relationship of revelation to reason. He

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is not satisfied as Barth to give a simple "nein!" to the question and retreat to a dogmatic ivory tower, but he seeks to rightly relate them in terms of the 20th century thinker.

The Content of Brunner's Works.--The most concise statement of Brunner's attempted apologia may be found in Nature and Grace in which he replies to Barth's charge of being a "Protestant scholastic" and departing from the fold as it were. Brunner wishes to defend an offenbarungsmachtigkeit only he confines it to merely a "passive capacity" for revelation (p. 13). In so doing, he distinguishes between the "formal" and "material" imago dei. The justitia originalis or the latter aspect has been lost, but all men possess the former by virtue of which they are responsible and intelligent creatures (p. 24). However, this neither means that man has a sufficient knowledge of God by virtue of this nor can he be saved by it. For Brunner it is merely the indispensable prerequisite for the special revelation in Christ--it helps establish man's guilt by making him responsible (p. 12).

A more elaborate presentation of this basic issue is found in Revelation and Reason in which he emphatically declares that "we don't begin our inquiry with reason and then work up to revelation, but, as a believing church, we begin our inquiry with revelation and then work our way outward to reason" (p. 4). And furthermore, only those whose eyes have been opened by faith can rightly read the evidence in the natural or general revelation of God. "God gives it in order that men may know Him, but man turns this into an illusion" (p. 65). So that even though the general revelation is intended to give a knowledge of God, nevertheless, it is perverted by man, and hence no theologia naturalis is sufficient as a basis

of a theologia revelata (p. 66). For all natural theology is in principle idolatrous. And, furthermore, any rational knowledge is necessarily "impersonal" dealing with "objects" (p. 364). Only a personal encounter gives us "I-thou" truth and leaves the realm of "I-it" truth. But this is not to say that the two are antithetical. God has created both. "Only those who respect this divine center... can also receive a clear view of things of the world. But where man exalts his reason to be a god, and makes himself the center of everything, everything gets out of focus" (p. 374).

At this point Brunner stresses the significance of the imago dei in man which he elaborates in Man in Revolt. The fundamental idea of this book is "that even the unbeliever is still related to God, and therefore that he is responsible, and that this responsibility is not put out of action even by the fullest emphasis upon the grace of God" (p. 11). In this God-relatedness, Brunner wishes to preserve man's responsibility. Man is in the divine image and even as a sinner he cannot escape from a knowledge of God. The only trouble is that he wishes to "subject God to reason instead of subjecting reason to God" (p. 242). The real war then is not between faith and reason but faith and rationalism. A logical structure stands behind the moral law without which it would be mere babble.

So then man in the divine image is responsible, that is, he has the ability to respond since he is God related even in his lost and fallen condition. And thus the imago dei is the "starting point" of a natural revelation. So God has an anknupfung (point of contact) with the natural man by which He may reveal Himself to man.

Having worked out his basic view on the revelation-reason issue, Brunner proceeds to apply it to culture and a Christian philosophy of history in Christianity and Culture. The basic contention of this work is that "only Christianity is capable of furnishing the basis of a civilization which can rightly be described as human" (p. v).

The world for Brunner is to be viewed neither through the eyes of naive realism or speculative realism--it is different from both in its structure and origin. Its objective basis is in God and yet it is what God thought and willed it to be before it was (p. 26). So the Christian view includes the basics of both and avoids the extremes of either. On this basis, Brunner opposes moral evolution since it is a child of optimism (p. 53). The meaning of life is not in but comes to man (p. 71).

With respect to a true understanding of history, Brunner feels that Christianity has established the science of history in its own right. It is only because God has acted in history in the incarnation and revealed its goal that we may take a linear view of history. Both the Greeks and Oriental had a circular view because for them motion wasn't going anywhere. Hence, the centrality of the supreme revelation of God in Christ is the focal point in a Christian philosophy of history--the theistic linear view.

At this point we may logically connect the work of the Mediator. For in this volume Brunner stresses the unique significance of the person and revelation of Christ in the Christian system. General revelation is indirect and incomplete. By it man knows only

¹ He prefers Christian "understanding of history" to "philosophy of history".

distorted truth and half truth. "Special revelation is only special or unique in that it is mediated through Christ who is the unique once-for-all (ἐφ' ἅπαντας) revelation of God" (p. 38). So then the core of the Christian faith is in the (only) Mediator. By virtue of the imago dei man has the capacity to receive this revelation but only when he does is the uniqueness of the Mediator known (p.152).

What a depiction of the distinction?

The Moment of Brunner's Works.--Of what importance is Brunner in the history of theological thought? With respect to a modern reconstruction of the age old problem of science and theology, Brunner has both some relevant and some significant things to say. (1) His emphasis on the necessity of "a capacity for revelation" in man is essential. (2) His distinction between the "formal" and "material" image is very helpful. (3) The stress on the absolute need of a special revelation is necessary. (4) And his differentiation of rationalism and reason is important. Of course there are things with which we do not agree, but on this issue it is more what he did not say than what he did say. (We personally could have wished for more of a positive as well as a negative place for reason in the Christian system). However, in making these value judgments about a man's significance in the history of thought we remind ourselves that only the leveling effects of a few centuries with its historical hindsight will be able to evaluate the true significance of any contribution any of our contemporaries may be making. Any present judgment is only tentative, partial, and premature.

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