

# EMIL BRUNNER'S THEOLOGY OF PREACHING

HERBERT E. DOUGLASS

Atlantic Union College, South Lancaster, Massachusetts

Perhaps at no other time in the history of the Christian church have the function and purposes of Christian proclamation in general, and preaching in particular, been so scrutinized as in the last twenty years. In the judgment of many, the crisis of the Christian church today—its apathy and enervation in the face of modern problems, its unreality and shopworn moralism—at its heart, is the crisis of preaching.<sup>1</sup>

Careful scholarship has shown that the Christian church arose as the response to kerygmatic preaching,<sup>2</sup> a fact which Paul attests out of experience when he notes that faith comes from preaching (Rom 10:17). If preaching was the principle vehicle which accounts for the authentic, dynamic fellowship of faith in the first century, then it seems most probable that the recovery of authority and relevance by Christianity would depend on solving the crisis of preaching.

It is not the purpose of this study to review the rising tide of scholarly contributions being made on the subject of the

<sup>1</sup> E.g. Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation* (hereafter cited as *Dogmatics*, III), trans. David Cairns and T. H. L. Parker (Philadelphia, 1962), p. 99: "Since the Reformation the sermon, that is, the exposition of the words of Scripture of a theological specialist who is called the minister of the divine Word (*verbi divini minister*), has been without doubt the centre, the authentic heart of the Church. This was for centuries uncontested and apparently constituted no problem. But it is precisely here that today the crisis of the Church is most evident—as a crisis of preaching." For an excellent analysis from the Roman Catholic viewpoint see Domenico Grasso, *Proclaiming God's Message* (South Bend, Ind., 1965), chap. I: "The Theological Problem of Preaching."

<sup>2</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Development* (New York, 1962). See also Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, 1946), pp. 122-164.

crisis in preaching, for minimum annotations alone would create a small book.<sup>3</sup> Neither is it our objective to analyze the alleged causes which have contributed to the modern plight of the Christian church which no longer can divide the world between the Christian nation and the unsaved heathen. Nor can we attempt here to answer thoroughly our own questions which necessarily precede a statement on the theology of preaching.

Yet, questions must be asked, especially by those most sympathetically concerned with the crisis, in order that the cause of the sickness may be more quickly isolated and defined. Although the shell remains, something vital has been well-nigh lost. What is there about preaching which, when well, brings forth hardy, responsible offspring but when sick, only a token of its former glory? What should one expect of a sermon? What is its purpose? What is the nature of that New Testament faith which is evoked by authentic preaching? How should the preacher understand his own relationship to the sermon? What is the "truth" which is to be proclaimed?

These are questions which can be answered only by careful theological thinking as it reflects on authentic faith and the Biblical Word. Many theological thinkers in the twentieth century have addressed themselves to the plight of the modern church, but perhaps no one has spoken more directly to the dilemma than Emil Brunner. He has been regarded as "the

<sup>3</sup> A significant list would include Merrill R. Abbey, *Preaching to the Contemporary Mind* (New York, 1963); Karl Barth, *The Preaching of the Gospel* (Philadelphia, 1963), and *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York, 1957); Herbert Farmer, *God and Men* (Nashville, Tenn., 1947), and *The Servant of the Word* (New York, 1942); P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (New York, 1907); John Knox, *The Integrity of Preaching* (New York, 1957); Michel Philibert, *Christ's Preaching—and Ours* (Richmond, Va., 1964); Dietrich Ritschl, *A Theology of Proclamation* (Richmond, Va., 1960); Jean-Jacques von Allmen, *Preaching and Congregation* (Richmond, Va., 1962); Theodore Wedel, *The Pulpit Rediscovered Theology* (Greenwich, Conn., 1956); Gustaf Wingren, *The Living Word* (Philadelphia, 1960).

most representative of those theologians who shaped the thought of the last generation of Protestants." <sup>4</sup>

However, what may not be as well known as his general theological impact is the soil and concern out of which his theological contribution grew: Brunner's theology was born out of his own actual need as a parish preacher and nurtured by confronting the perennial task of making God's Word meaningful to modern man. His work has been marked by a conscious effort to clarify and to correct the crisis of preaching. <sup>5</sup>

Early in his pastoral concern for Christian proclamation, along with Karl Barth, he saw the discrepancies between the principles of liberalism, in which he had been academically trained, and the world of the Bible. At the same time he did not return entirely to the position of traditional orthodox Protestantism. <sup>6</sup> On the one hand, liberalism had reduced the distance between God and man by emphasizing the human potential and the reliability of man's common reasoned experience as the standard of ultimate truth. On the other hand, traditional orthodoxy too often had distorted the God-man relationship by allowing faith to slip from the personal dimension into a purely noetic one and by reducing the responsibility of man in the faith-event. Liberalism accused orthodoxy of irrelevancy and pre-critical acceptance of authority; orthodoxy returned the compliment by accusing liberalism of inauthenticity and relativism.

<sup>4</sup> Wilhelm Pauck, "The Church-Historical Setting of Brunner's Theology," in *The Theology of Emil Brunner*, ed. Charles W. Kegley (New York, 1962), p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Brunner, "Intellectual Autobiography," Kegley, *op. cit.*, p. 9. For an explication of Brunner's theological system as a theology of preaching see the present writer's "Encounter with Brunner—An Analysis of Emil Brunner's Proposed Transcendence of the Subjectivism-Objectivism Dichotomy in its Relation to Christian Proclamation" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Pacific School of Religion, 1964).

<sup>6</sup> Brunner, *The Theology of Crisis* (New York, 1930), pp. 2, 21, 22. Cf. Barth's experience in his *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, pp. 100, 101.

Brunner saw that this division was only the modern unfolding of the perennial tension within Christianity between subjectivism and objectivism. This dichotomy has rent the church since those days when theologians falsified the New Testament understanding of truth by allowing it to slip into the traditional subject-object antithesis of Greek philosophy, which in itself had been a legitimate tool for natural-rational thought.<sup>7</sup> However, Brunner pointed out, when Christian truth is thus to be sought within these categories, the inevitable result is a disproportionate emphasis on either the subject (*e.g.*, the subjectivism of liberalism) or on the object (*e.g.*, the objectivism of traditional orthodoxy).

This tension within the Christian church has directly affected the proclamation of the gospel. Within traditional orthodoxy, the Bible and/or ecclesiastical dogma, rather than God himself, too often emerged as the primary object of faith. Thus faith tended to be more of a mental process, an impersonal response involving only an attempted correction of external habits rather than a self-authenticating, personal encounter between God and man.<sup>8</sup> For some, preaching was merely a processing of information rather than an address to responsible men who had the right to expect relevancy and personal meaning before decision; for others, pulpit entreaty was simply to urge people to conform their lives to objective standards which would validate their faith.

With the Hellenization of New Testament kerygmatic preaching into subject-object categories, objectivism was strengthened whenever preaching became defined as the presentation of theological propositions about God, and when the faith it was to awaken was conceived of as evoked primarily on the level of the intellect rather than on that of ex-

<sup>7</sup> Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, trans. Amandus W. Loos (Philadelphia, 1943), pp. 7, 21 *et passim*.

<sup>8</sup> Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, pp. 36-40. See also Brunner, *Truth as Encounter* (a new and enlarged edition of *The Divine-Human Encounter*; Philadelphia, 1964), pp. 76-78, 174-181.

perience. Too often the preacher is then encouraged to think that his success depends on logic, comprehensiveness and/or ability to excite certain human emotions.

Brunner emphasized that through the centuries whenever preaching has tended to reduce Christian proclamation to mere didactic exposition of the Bible or to hortatory moralisms, the church has instinctively reacted with the rise of subjectivistic movements which attempted to interiorize disproportionately the religious experience. Faith, to these groups, was conceived more as a personal experience, to be understood in ways most meaningful to the individual. Too often, however, this reactionary emphasis on personal meaning in Christian faith reduced the importance of the given Word. The Word of God would thus tend to become more of an expression of man's religious self-consciousness rather than a Word from the outside of man and spoken to man.<sup>9</sup>

Brunner saw that this historical oscillation and tension between preaching as didactic exposition in the attempt to find authority, and preaching as personal experience in the attempt to find relevance, lays bare the basic sickness of the Christian church. Whenever the church has lost sight of the purpose and function of preaching (that is, whenever its theology misunderstands what was happening between God and man during apostolic preaching), there arise within and without the church the symptoms of the crisis of preaching—on the surface, for all practical purposes, the lack of either authority or relevance, and fundamentally the absence of both.

At the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, Brunner, together with a number of other theologians, pointed to a third way between the traditional alternatives of subjectivism and objectivism. Their attack faced two fronts: with

<sup>9</sup> Referring to Schleiermacher, Brunner said, "His subjective interpretation of the faith of the church, when closely examined, tends to empty it of content completely. The Word is no longer the divine, revealed authority and the foundation of faith, but only the means of expressing that faith." *Truth as Encounter*, p. 80.

their emphasis on the radical qualitative discontinuity between God and man, and on the personal God as the initiator of revelation, they hit the heart of liberalism; and with their emphasis on God as Absolute Subject who can be neither adequately objectified in human words nor heard outside the commitment of faith, they sought to avoid the objectivistic tendencies of traditional orthodoxy.<sup>10</sup>

In later years, however, Brunner believed that the early promise of this movement had faded with the development of a new subjectivism-objectivism dichotomy, not outside but within its very ranks. In Barth's developing theology, he saw the unfolding of objectivism and in Bultmann's reaction to Barth, a new form of subjectivism.<sup>11</sup> With this Brunner's own conviction was strengthened that the only solution to the perennial impasse between subjectivism and objectivism in Christian proclamation is to develop the theme of "truth as encounter" as the basic principle of the Christian message.<sup>12</sup>

Brunner's understanding of the Biblical presentation of truth as encounter suggests an ellipse moving about two foci: the self-communicating God and the responsivity of man.<sup>13</sup> He insisted that to misunderstand or to stress disproportionately either focus would be to allow Christian preaching to fall into the errors of subjectivism or objectivism. Those who stress a transcendent God, One Who must reveal Himself if He is to be known, without proper emphasis on the

<sup>10</sup> *The Theology of Crisis* constituted Brunner's early lectures as he endeavored to transcend the increasing theological relativity within subjectivistic liberalism and the hardening categories of objectivistic orthodoxy.

<sup>11</sup> *Dogmatics*, III, 212-224; *Truth as Encounter*, pp. 41-49.

<sup>12</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption* (hereafter cited as *Dogmatics*, II), trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, 1952), p. v; *Dogmatics*, III, pp. ix, x. It is interesting to note that the fourth chapter of the six added in the second edition of *Wahrheit als Begegnung* (Zurich, 1963) was entitled, "Die Theologie jenseits von Barth und Bultmann."

<sup>13</sup> This concept of a theological ellipse depicting the personal nature of divine communication is developed in the author's above-mentioned dissertation (n. 5), pp. 121-267.

personal nature of revelation or on man's responsibility to receive and to respond intelligently, tend to commit the mistakes of objectivism; those who stress the responsibility of man and his freedom at the expense of the objective reality of God's self-disclosure tend to fall into the errors of subjectivism.

"Self-communication" emphasizes the personal character of the divine disclosure, that it is a Person who is being revealed. "Self-communication" makes clear that the purpose of revelation is more than the transmission of information, even though it be information about a Personal God who desires personal response from His creation. Brunner thus understood divine Revelation as a transitive event between two subjects.<sup>14</sup>

The concept of responsivity emphasizes that God speaks to and apprehends what He has put into Man in creation—God does not by-pass what was made to be used.<sup>15</sup> Man was created by the Word, in the Word, and for the Word. That is, he was created by God in such a way that he may freely respond to his Lord who desires to fellowship with him. This ability to relate and to respond in fellowship with God is the formal image of God which remains as man's essential nature whether he rightly responds to God or not.<sup>16</sup>

But, Man as a self-determining person misused his freedom and became *ir*responsible in his rebellion, not *un*responsible. This rebellion, or sin, is the act of the whole man; it is the

<sup>14</sup> Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, pp. 32, 33; Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God* (hereafter cited as *Dogmatics*, I), trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, 1950), p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> "Das Evangelium wendet sich nicht an einen Menschen, der von Gott überhaupt nichts weiss und hat" ("The gospel does not present itself to a person who knows and has nothing at all of God"), "Die andere Aufgabe der Theologie," *Zwischen den Zeiten*, VII (1929), 262. For Brunner's development of this idea of responsibility, see *Man in Revolt*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, 1947), pp. 70-203; *Revelation and Reason*, pp. 48-80; *The Divine Imperative*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, 1948), pp. 152-162; *Dogmatics*, II, 46-131.

<sup>16</sup> *Dogmatics*, II, 55-61.

turning away from the will of God—the failure to respond—and not mere weakness or ignorance. Yet, man is still responsible (that is, able to respond) in his rebellion and in some degree continues to sense his misused responsibility. Because in sin man lives in contradiction to his created nature, the consequences of the contradiction set up a condition wherein the gospel of Christianity can find a “point of contact” (*Anknüpfungspunkt*).<sup>17</sup> In fact, Brunner held that the revelation in creation, that is, something about God’s will and man’s original destiny as it now can be discerned apart from the Scriptures, becomes the presupposition for the saving revelation in Jesus Christ. The forms of revelation as directed to sinful man are determined by his human capacity to receive it. The missionary point of contact is in the sphere of responsibility which all men share to some degree of awareness.<sup>18</sup>

Faith, then, as Brunner understood the New Testament, is the right relationship of the hitherto irresponsible man to the Lordship of the self-communicating God. The nature of New Testament faith, he contended, is determined by God’s intention in His self-communication. The personal act of faith is the correlate to the personal act of God’s self-communication.<sup>19</sup> Faith, the personal act of decision, is simultaneously perception and obedience: 1) God in Christ is recognized as the Lord of life, and man’s sense of distance and anxiety is perceived as the result of his rebellion (a knowledge experienced first hand); 2) in this awareness, there is the response of obedient love to the Lord God who not only makes clear man’s state as sinner, but who also declares man forgiven and reinstated as his son.

This new life of authentic faith leads to a transformed existence wherein man wills to do the will of a holy and loving God—that is, to relate to all persons as God related Himself

<sup>17</sup> *Man in Revolt*, pp. 527-541.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63; See *Dogmatics*, II, 46.

<sup>19</sup> *Truth as Encounter*, pp. 102-108.



to man.<sup>20</sup> The life of faith becomes a reflection of God's love, thus making possible the emergence of genuine community wherever men with genuine faith exist. Faith thus becomes the basis for the existence of the Christian church.<sup>21</sup>

Brunner held authentic faith to be the result of kerygmatic preaching (Rom 10:17), and saw it as arising when the historic Word (the objective witness) and the interior Word (the subjective witness) converge and address man as the contemporary Word of God. The preaching church is the bridge which carries over the years the authority and relevancy of the historically grounded Christ-event and, joining this proclamation, the Holy Spirit makes the historic Christ-event present and self-validating to men today. Thus the man of faith responds, not simply to historical records, but to the living Lord who speaks in a self-authenticating manner. Faith proves preaching relevant and authoritative by bringing unity and meaning to the thinking person and community to the estranged.<sup>22</sup>

In this understanding of revelation as a transitive event between two subjects, Brunner believed that he had provided theological support for transcending the subjectivism-objectivism dichotomy in Christian proclamation. Proclamation is seen as the contemporary extension of revelation as a transitive event. Implicit within this theological structure in addition to correct content are the methodological principles for authentic proclamation. Man's methods of proclamation are to be the same as God's; that is, the preacher should adapt the faith-awakening address to every man's condition so that he can readily understand it. The problems of "communication of" and "communication between"<sup>23</sup> are resolved in understanding both revelation and proclamation as involving personal

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 162-167.

<sup>21</sup> *Dogmatics*, III, 290-305; see also pp. 134-139.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 5, 134; see also *Revelation and Reason*, pp. 136-164.

<sup>23</sup> Hendrick Kraemer, *The Communication of the Christian Faith* (Philadelphia, 1956), pp. 11 ff.

encounter between the self-communicating Absolute Person and the man who was created to respond to his Lord. Although man's freedom and prerogative to understand that to which he must commit himself are respected, the gospel, if rightly conveyed, speaks to his actual condition in such a way that its rejection would be understood as a turn from reality. For man to turn from Jesus as his Lord is to reject the "truth"—about himself and the world in general.<sup>24</sup>

For Brunner the sermon should not be an exposition of the preacher's religious self-consciousness, nor an attempt at a sociological program, nor an endeavor to prove the existence of God, nor merely a conveyance for the transmission of information; it should rather be a faithful exposition of the historic Word so that the human situation once spoken to by the Spirit can be identified with the human situation today and through this reconstruction, the Spirit can again address man in his need. The preacher is thus both the personal witness to the self-communicating God, and the living channel whereby the historic faith-awakening message is made relevant to the individual who already is listening to the faith-evoking call of the Spirit.<sup>25</sup>

Authentic proclamation does not resort to mere announcement or command, because man remains a subject and not an object in the transitive event of revelation. Neither does God implant within man His own activity which does man's responding for him, nor is there any kind of objective-causal influence at work wherein the Word merely has to be spoken without particular regard for the human situation.

Brunner diagnosed the modern sickness of the church as ailing exactly where its life of faith is generated—in its preaching. Whenever New Testament faith is misunderstood or perverted, the appeal to authority without meaningful relevancy fails to move thinking men; likewise does the disproportional emphasis on relevancy and accommodation fail

<sup>24</sup> *Dogmatics*, III, 150, 151; *Revelation and Reason*, p. 182.

<sup>25</sup> *Revelation and Reason*, pp. 157, 158; *Dogmatics*, I, 19; III, 50.

to satisfy men who soon sense the lack of a genuine authority.<sup>26</sup> The world sees little evidence of authority or relevancy when Christian proclamation does not create the transformed existence it talks so much about. When revelation and proclamation are not understood as transitive events, when faith is not understood as the total response of trusting obedience which proves itself effective in love, when the church thus comes to misunderstand itself as simply a conveyor and keeper of doctrine, or as a religious institution which may dispense salvation, the ability of the Christian voice to speak to self-determining, responsible men is desperately handicapped.

But when Christian proclamation is understood as the articulated witness of the faith-fellowship, by men who, in understanding God's "*Gabe und Aufgabe*," his gift which is also his commission, move out toward their fellowmen with the same love by which God encountered them (that is, without coercion or threat, without ignoring each man's need to understand what is being proclaimed), there will be a great many more who will take time to listen. Authentic proclamation, as validated by authentic faith, witnesses to the union of *logos* and *dunamis* and by so doing unites the legitimate emphasis of both objectivism and subjectivism while transcending their distortions.

Brunner contended that a correct theology of preaching is the church's primary concern, that the "care of the proclamation of the Word is therefore the first and most immediate care, the institution of preaching is the task laid upon us by God; the office of preaching is therefore the foundation which bears Christianity, the basis of the Church."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> *Dogmatics*, III, 102, 108, 111, 114, 115, 135.

<sup>27</sup> Brunner, *God and Man*, trans. David Cairns (London, 1936), p. 126.