Concerning Emil Brunner

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Among those few theological thinkers that dominate the contemporary scene, probably none commands a wider hearing than Emil Brunner. Dr. Brunner lectures to crowded halls of students in Switzerland's largest university, the University of Zurich. Of medium stature, with silver gray hair and a brisk step, he enters the room clad in the inevitable dark suit, notes in hand. As the door slams behind him, the babel of languages—the Swiss themselves speak fifty languages when their dialects are counted, and Brunner's classes are international gatherings—ceases and the little professor mounts to the podium amid the stomping of approving feet and the lecture begins.

A great deal has been written not only by Brunner, but also about him. For all that, for many American students of theology, there still attaches confusion to the question of just what Brunner believes. This situation may no doubt be attributed in part to the fact that many of the sources are in German. A much more significant factor, however, is the very complexity of the new theology. In this article we shall illustrate what we mean, concerning ourselves with a special problem, the fall of man, as this problem took shape in a controversy between Ludwig Köhler, a professor of Old Testament, and Emil Brunner.

Though this discussion transpired in 1926, only two years after Brunner had stepped into the front ranks of theological controversy with the firing of his first big gun, Die Mystik und das Wort, the material is harmonious with his latest thoughts on this very crucial matter.

Prof. Köhler, Brunner's colleague on the theological faculty of Zurich, precipitated the debate when he published an article on the fall of Adam which appeared in a religious paper sponsored by the Reformed church of German Switzerland. An old school liberal, Köhler argued the story of the fall has as its purpose the explanation of phenomena of experience naturally intriguing to the primitive mind, as, why the snakes have no legs, why thistles grow, why women have pain at childbirth, why people wear clothes, etc. The myth of the fall never played any significant role in the religion of the Old Testament or in Judaism even down to the time of Jesus. It came into its own with Paul, for whom it is not only history, but along with the death of Christ, the most important event in history. The fall is no mere speculation for Paul. Adam is not simply a type of humanity. Rather, for him, the fall of Adam is one of two foci of the ellipse of the salvation event. If one cancel it out, Paul's entire structure falls to the ground. (Köhler is thinking of course of Paul's federal theology in Romans 5.) The same applies, mutatis mutandis, to the Reformers. He is therefore thankful that he can see in Paulinism only one of many attempts in the New Testament to bring the saving work of Jesus to him who is eager for salvation.

Brunner replied to this article in a subsequent number of the same paper. He complained of the irreverent manner in which Köhler had handled the Genesis narrative as though it were a fairy tale. Köhler, he affirmed, was virtually joking away a thought-entity that had had a fundamental place in the thought of the faith of the greatest spiritual leaders of the West, from Augustine to Pascal and

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1Tübingen, 1924. Translated as Mysticism and the Word.

2Ludwig Köhler, "Die Geschichte vom Sündenfall," Kirchenblatt für die reformierte Schweiz, (July 8, 1926), 105 ff.

Søren Kierkegaard. As for his part, Brunner was happy to take the lowest seat with the novices around the large table, at the head of which sat Paul, the great teacher, who instructed mankind concerning this history of the Fall as concerning something which involves all in a most urgent way. But then comes the remarkable sidestepping. Brunner proceeds to read the account in Genesis 3 existentially, and even goes on to say that was the way Paul and the Reformers read it. "They (viz., Paul and the Reformers) speak of the status integritatis, where death and sin were not, and salvation where death and sin will no more be... It is this condition so completely other than what we know" with which they are concerned" (p. 115). "Hence they are speaking of that which lies before the historical world begins this side of the primal state as the result of the fall." (115). Likewise the revelation in Christ and the second coming of Christ are the suspension of that which followed upon the fall (p. 114).

This is held to be the meaning with Paul, as well as with the Reformers, of this "myth." Hence it is not a matter of "something historical," but of the fatal beginning and the glorious overcoming of history through the mercy and power of God. The writer of Genesis, then, is answering a truly existential question, the question of the origin of our present historical existence in distinction to the primeval state which was created good by God. The answer which the writer of the fall narrative gives to the question of our present historical existence is entirely different from anything found in philosophy or religion. It is because man disobeyed God, wished to be as God to know good and evil, that we now sustain all the miseries of this life and death itself. An historical event is not reported here (Genesis 3) but here the "event" which first caused history, viz. our sinful history, laden with the curse and death, to begin before the gates of paradise, is spoken of in a childlike and simple way. This says Brunner, is by far the profoundest insight we have into the ground riddle of our existence. "It requires no allegorical exegetical art to see this, but on the contrary, the most extraordinary blindness not to see it." (114)

Brunner catches up Köhler's statement that no Old Testament scholar of repute would today defend the history of the fall, and rejoins that in the "region in which Genesis 3 and Romans 5 move, the professional Old Testament scholar as such has nothing to seek." "Precisely because the narrative clearly has the character of a myth, therefore it is not in the area in which the historian as such is competent." "If the believer meant by the fall something which took place on the plane of time-space events which are accessible to the historian, he would, to be sure, as has often been the case, fall into a conflict with science." (pp. 115-116)

Köhler proceeded to reply to Brunner briefly, but pointedly, that all of Brunner's acute dialectic did not alter the simple fact that for Paul the fall as well as the subsequent history of man were straight history. Paul knew nothing of the dimensional difference between primal history and time-space history. A pastor, P. Marti, threw his hat into the ring with the observation that it would take gnostic illumination not to see that for Paul, creation, fall, the reign of sin and death, the law, Christ and the restoration all occur on the same time-space plane.

This forced Brunner in a final rebuttal to face a bit more squarely. All this harangue, said he, about the fact that the fall was for Paul historical was beside the point. That objection was valid only against the verbal-inspiration view. Undoubtedly for the Jehovist, as well as for Paul and the Reformers, the fall was something which really happened 4000 years ago. That is to say, the form given the idea of the fall is that of an "historical occurrence." No doubt Paul when he spoke of heaven and the heavens thought in terms of the three-story structure of

Babylonian cosmology, as did everyone in antiquity. Must we then abandon the idea of heaven? Brunner even waxes prophetic. By the year 3000 our present world view will be as outmoded as that of the ancients now is.

Yet no one can give expression to the thoughts of his faith without involvement in his view of the universe. What can be said of Paul and his Babylonian astronomy will prove true of Copernicus and Darwin;

The tension of Brunner's yes-no dialectic comes to focus when he proclaims,

Just as it is vital to me that a heaven exists—the heaven of which Paul speaks, in spite of the fact that he always, whenever he speaks of it, also speaks of that one which does not exist, i.e., the Babylonian glass-bell, so also it is vital to me from the standpoint of faith and dogma, that creation and the fall really happened, in spite of the fact that I know that they did not so happen (as to time, place) as Genesis 3, Paul, and the Reformers supposed.

The great error of the Enlightenment, concludes Brunner, was to suppose that world view and religious faith could not be separated, the loss of the form involved the loss of the idea.

It becomes evident in this second article that the status integrates is not quite as "absolutely other" for Paul and the Reformers as Brunner affirmed at first. The fall was not, for them as for Brunner, something beyond and before history, but rather in history. But if for Paul, the fall was an event on the calendar, it would seem to have interesting implications. A. Schlat-ter once observed* that the science of anthropology has greatly expanded the time between the beginning of human origins and critical history. Brunner laments that Schatter confused the existential "whence" (Woher) with the causal-metaphysical one. Would not the same apply to Paul,

if he conceived of the fall as an event within time-space history? But what could be worse than not thinking at all times existentially?

For another thing, one cannot but admire in a way, the facile movement of Brunner's thought, by which he moves from the time-space framework to that which lies beyond. It would help if we all could have this mental dexterity. Then we could avoid such questions as what kind of an event it might be that does not occur in time and space. Paul's doctrine is: At a given time and in a given place, the first man committed a sinul act of transgression against the will of God. If we remove the time-space form in which this proposition is cast, we do not have much left to talk of. Brunner may speak of the fall as an "event" in quotes, he may call it primal history, or even affirm, as he does in one place, that he "does not know what the fall is, nor why and how it happened." The prosaic mind can hardly escape the suspicion that an event which did not happen in time and space, did not happen at all.

One final observation is germaine. For Brunner the revelation in Christ, the Second Adam, is likewise on the dimension of primal history, as observed above. It would seem then definitely to follow that the historical Jesus is only the form of the Christ idea and therefore the existence of Jesus would, qua historical event, be a matter of indifference to faith. At one time Barth assented as much* but has now changed his mind, a privilege which he exercises quite freely. Brunner, however, has never even made such a suggestion. He has rather, from the time of his classic Christology, Der Mittler," insisted that the existence of Jesus of Nazareth as an historical person in time and space is absolutely essential to Christianity. It is obvious why he makes this insistence. If there is no absolute value attaching to the historical Jesus, then we are back in the

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*The polemical context probably explains the overstatement. Presumably the heliocentric universe will not suffer the fate of the geocentric.

"The process of science is, in spite of all setbacks in detail, in the main continuous." E. Brunner, Der Mittler, Tubingen, 1927, footnote 15.


"Das Christliche Dogma, Stuttgart, 1911,

"Der Mittler, Tübingen, 1927, footnote 15.


"Tübingen, 1927, Translated as The Mediator.
old liberalism, which reduces Jesus to another religious genius, whose significance attaches not to his person, but his teaching. Had Jesus of Nazareth never lived, someone else would have discovered eventually the religious truth which he taught. To counteract this, Brunner must insist that the historical Jesus, and not just the Christ idea, is essential to Christian faith. But Brunner has never anywhere indicated how it is possible to existentialize the existence of the first Adam and to hold to the absolute necessity of the Jesus-event. It is an ellipse with one focus.