

The Problem of Universal Salvation in the Theology of Emil Brunner

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This article examines the approach of the twentieth-century dialectical theologian, Emil Brunner (1889–1966), to the perennial theological problem of the possibility of universal salvation, a topic which has occupied the reflections of Christopher Morse, whose scholarship we honor in the present volume. Emil Brunner was Professor of Systematic and Practical Theology at the University of Zürich and an eminent and prolific theologian in his own right. However, although Brunner exerted considerably greater influence than Barth upon the contemporaneous North American theological scene,¹ he is known today primarily for his dispute with Barth over the question of natural theology.² In light of the fact that Brunner's thought has been largely neglected since the 1930s, whereas the study of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics* still represents a rite of passage in the context of theological formation, one often finds that where Brunner is mentioned at all, it is habitually in the context of Barth's theology, and consequently Brunner's own theology has generally been interpreted in the shadow of Barth's titanic enterprise. Indeed, at certain points, Brunner himself lends credibility to this hermeneutical approach to his work.³ In the present article, however, I shall attempt to exposit Brunner's position for itself, and not primarily in terms of its engagement with Barth.⁴

In this article, I shall first sketch the principal aspects of Augustine's approach to the problem of universal salvation in order to provide a basic context for Brunner's approach to the topic. I shall then outline Brunner's approach to the problem, following which I shall remark both upon the ways in which Brunner's solution can be understood as a development upon that of Augustine and upon some of the theological problems it raises.

1 I. John Hesselink, "Emil Brunner: A Centennial Perspective," *Christian Century*, December 13 1989: 1171. I should like to express my appreciation to the Bourse d'excellence pour étudiants étrangers program of the Quebec Ministry of Education's Natural Science and Technology Research Council and to the Richard H. Tomlinson Doctoral Fellowship program of McGill University for the funding which made this research possible.

2 Barth is notorious for the concise title of his response to Brunner, 'Nein.' Interestingly, Trevor Hart is of the opinion that Barth misunderstood Brunner on the question of natural theology, see Trevor Hart, "A Capacity for Ambiguity? The Barth-Brunner debate revisited," *Tyndale Bulletin* 44/2 (1993): 289–305.

3 See Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God: Dogmatics Vol. I.*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), 135 where he writes that "it is very cheering to note that Karl Barth...has come to the same conclusion."

4 Hayes has already pursued an examination of Brunner's critique of Barth's approach to the problem of universal salvation in his S.T.M. thesis on this topic. See Stephen Andrew Hayes, *Emil Brunner's Criticism of Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election*, S.T.M. Thesis, McGill University, Montreal, 1970 (unpublished manuscript in McLennan Library, McGill University, Montreal).

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO'S APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSAL SALVATION IN *CITY OF GOD*

The possibility of the salvation of those outside the visible body of the Church is a question which has occupied Christian theologians since at least the subapostolic era. This was at no point a settled topic, and among the Church Fathers themselves theological positions on the topic varied widely. Origen of Alexandria, for example, suggested in *On First Principles* that all intelligent beings would inevitably attain to salvation as a function of the reconciliatory dynamic of the cosmic order, according to which Christ is destined to include all rational creation within himself.⁵ In contrast, Fulgentius of Ruspe, widely characterized as one of Augustine of Hippo's theological successors, took a much stricter line in his *To Peter on the Faith*, in which he averred that "with the exception of those who are baptized in their own blood for the name of Christ,"⁶ who by their baptism of blood are incorporated into the Catholic Church,⁷ no one outside the visible communion of the Catholic Church can be saved.⁸ Accordingly, Fulgentius exhorted his interlocutor to "hold most firmly and never doubt that not only *all* pagans but also *all* Jews and *all* heretics and schismatics who finish this present life outside the Catholic Church will go 'into eternal fire which has been prepared for the Devil and his angels.'"⁹ According to Fulgentius, whoever does not profess and is not incorporated into the true Church, "even if he shed his blood for the name of Christ, can *never* be saved."¹⁰

In the Middle Ages, Fulgentius's *To Peter on the Faith* was "widely attributed to St. Augustine."¹¹ Augustine himself, however, occupies a mediating position between the polarized positions of Origen and Fulgentius. Augustine discusses the salvation of those outside the visible Church in Book XVIII of *City of God*, where he acknowledges the operation of salvific grace outside the "house of Israel" before the coming of Christ, writing that "there have been some men who belonged, *not by earthly but by heavenly fellowship*, to the true Israelites, the citizens of the supernal fatherland," and asserting that it is absurd to claim otherwise.¹² Augustine adduces the example of Job to counter those who reject the possibility of salvation outside Israel, interpreting Job typologically as the righteous and pious Gentile whose presence in the biblical testimony was directly intended "by the dispensation of divine providence that from this one man we should know that there could also be men of other nations who lived according to God, and were pleasing to

5 Origen of Alexandria, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth & intro. Henri de Lubac (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), 242–243; 248.

6 Fulgentius of Ruspe, *Selected Works*, trans. Robert B. Eno (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 101.

7 Fulgentius, *Selected Works*, 88.

8 Fulgentius, *Selected Works*, 101.

9 Fulgentius, *Selected Works*, 104. Emphasis mine.

10 Fulgentius, *Selected Works*, 104. Emphasis mine.

11 Eno in Fulgentius, *Selected Works*, 59.

12 Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. & trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 893. Italics mine.

Him, as belonging to this spiritual Jerusalem.”¹³ Another example, the Sibyl of Er-ythrae, “speaks out against such [pagan] gods and their worshippers so forcefully that she is, it seems, to be included among those who belong to the City of God.”¹⁴ According to Augustine, this affirmation of the possibility of salvation outside the historical community of faith can be understood to be consonant with the *solo Christo* of the Christian faith, since “it is not to be believed...that this was granted to anyone unless he had received a divine revelation of ‘the one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.’”¹⁵ This possibility, moreover, is limited to this life, since after death one’s destiny is fixed: if one has remained “impenitent” to the point of death, one is to be counted “as one of the devil’s faction.”¹⁶

We have seen that Augustine affirms the possibility of salvation outside the visible body of Israel. His position on the possibility of *universal* salvation, however, is uncompromisingly negative. In Book XXI of his *City of God*, Augustine indicates some degree of familiarity with the proposition that all human beings, wicked as well as good, will be saved by virtue of the divine mercy, noting that there are some Christians who harbor hope for this outcome. While Augustine views these Christians as well-meaning but deluded, referring to them as “merciful brethren of ours,”¹⁷ he nevertheless accuses them of being misled and inconsistent. According to Augustine, the universalists are misled because they inadvertently offend God by depriving him of his capacity to judge and condemn the wicked.¹⁸ Furthermore, they are inconsistent because, whereas their argument that God will be merciful on all the wicked relies upon the proposition that “this opinion [universal human salvation] is good and true because it is merciful,” they do not take this proposition to its logical conclusion: the salvation of the fallen angels. As Augustine writes: “Why...does this stream of mercy flow far enough to encompass the whole human race and then dry up as soon as it reaches the angels? Yet those whose belief we are here discussing do not venture to extend their mercy beyond human beings, so as to provide even for the redemption of the devil himself,” a possibility which Augustine declares to be quite inconceivable, since it represents “a distortion of the righteous words of God.”¹⁹ Augustine is convinced that the impossibility of both universal human salvation and the salvation of the fallen angels is enshrined in Scripture; and that to propose the possibility of universal human salvation would entail that “the sentence of God pronounced on all the wicked, angels as well as men, [must] be true in the case of angels but false in that of men,” meaning that “the conjectures of men will be worth more than the word of God.”²⁰ This does not entail, however, that *all* the wicked are necessarily condemned, for there are certain sins “which impede us in the attainment of the

13 Augustine, *City of God*, 893.

14 Augustine, *City of God*, 851.

15 Augustine, *City of God*, 894.

16 Augustine, *City of God*, 1086.

17 Augustine, *City of God*, 1076.

18 Augustine, *City of God*, 1078–1080.

19 Augustine, *City of God*, 1077.

20 Augustine, *City of God*, 1084.

kingdom of God but which can nonetheless find pardon,” not through our own conversion, but “through the merits of holy friends.”²¹

We have seen that Augustine affirms the possibility and actuality of salvation outside the historical community of faith, but denies emphatically the possibility of universal salvation. One of the anticipable objections to Augustine’s position, which, as we shall see, is of especial relevance to Brunner’s approach, is that the concept of divine judgment attributes mutable states to God. Augustine addresses this objection in Book XV, where he argues that “God’s anger is not a disturbance in the mind” and does not reflect mutability in God.²² According to Augustine, God’s action of saving or condemning a particular human being, insofar as it is linked with her own decision in history, either to love God or to love herself,²³ does not entail any modification of God’s will or disposition towards her: “this is only the application of His immutable plan to mutable things,”²⁴ his immutable plan being to create good and to “bring forth [good] from...evil.”²⁵ Accordingly, Augustine explains in Book IX that biblical texts which speak of God’s anger are not to be interpreted as indicating a change in God himself: “according to the Scriptures, God Himself is angered; yet He is not disturbed by any passion. For this word is used to indicate the *effect* of His vengeance, *rather than any disturbance to which He is subject*.”²⁶ In Book I, Augustine explains how this is possible, using the example of a fire to articulate how it is possible for singular divine providence to give rise to various effects: he writes, “in the same fire, gold glows but chaff smokes, and under the same flail straw is crushed and grain purified...by the same token, when *one and the same force* falls upon the good and the wicked, the former are purged and purified but the latter damned, ruined and destroyed.”²⁷

BRUNNER’S APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSAL SALVATION (I): BRUNNER’S DOCTRINE OF THE HISTORICITY OF FAITH AND THE POSSIBILITY OF UNIVERSAL SALVATION

We have seen how Augustine affirms the possibility of salvation outside the visible Church while denying the possibility of universal salvation. One of the interesting aspects of Brunner’s approach to the topic is the fact that his position represents a complete inversion of Augustine’s position: according to Brunner, the act of justifying faith eventuates only within the historical community of faith, but this does not preclude the possibility of universal salvation.

According to Brunner, Jesus Christ is the event of the in-breaking of eternity into history, an in-breaking which constitutes the activating principle of faith:

21 Augustine, *City of God*, 1104–1105.

22 Augustine, *City of God*, 686.

23 Augustine, *City of God*, 632–633.

24 Augustine, *City of God*, 686.

25 Augustine, *City of God*, 604.

26 Augustine, *City of God*, 366.

27 Augustine, *City of God*, 12.

Christians believe in Jesus Christ because Jesus really is the Christ, the one who brings humanity into “contact with reality,” which, for Brunner, is the very essence of faith.²⁸ As he writes: “Faith in Jesus Christ is living contact with reality, pure and simple; but it is certainly contact with reality of a special kind, and therefore it is also a way of coming into contact with reality which is itself of a peculiar character.”²⁹ For Brunner, the distinguishing characteristic of this mode of contact with reality consists in the fact that the type of understanding manifested in the act of faith is a function not of the active understanding but of the receptive understanding: faith is an act of understanding by which the believer is grasped by the reality of Jesus Christ.³⁰ Therefore, the essence of this faith is not a series of propositional affirmations. Rather, it is encounter with Jesus Christ: “faith is not primarily the acceptance of a dogma, but an ‘existential’ personal happening.... It is the self-surrender of our own person and its claim, its selfish will, to the God who encounters it in Christ. Faith is the most personal act conceivable, the surrender of self to the Redeemer who surrenders Himself. Faith in Jesus Christ is a total transformation of existence.”³¹

Brunner claims, following Augustine, that it is only in the “encounter with Jesus Christ” that the human being can recognize her own fallen state and be converted: outside the sphere of this encounter with Jesus Christ, humanity “uses religion or morals to protect him[self] against the judgment of God.”³² Unlike Augustine, however, Brunner asserts that this faith-generating encounter can only take place within the context of the historical community of faith, the *Ekklesia*, which is the instrument of God’s self-communication: “the Lord uses its Word of witness to continue His work of self-communication.”³³ Brunner argues that, because humanity is an historical being, the generation of human faith can only take place in history, “for apart from real history...there *is* no reality that in the strict sense transforms existence.”³⁴ For this reason, Jesus Christ does not encounter the individual human being in an ahistorical fashion, but only by means of historical mediation. According to Brunner, this historical mediation is the apostolic witness of the *Ekklesia*, the “brotherhood resulting from faith in Christ.”³⁵ It is only through the apostolic witness of the *Ekklesia* that the act of faith, the encounter in which one is grasped by the reality of Jesus Christ, takes place. As he states, “We can hear this message only through the witnessing Word of the witnesses. Thus the Word which creates faith is at the same time God’s Word and man’s word, Word of the Spirit, and *paradosis*, tradition. The Word about Christ is at the same time spiritual and historical. This character refers back to the Incarnation of the

28 Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption: Dogmatics Vol. II*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952), 241.

29 Brunner, *Dogmatics II*, 241.

30 Brunner, *Dogmatics II*, 242.

31 Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation: Dogmatics III*, trans. David Cairns & T. H. L. Parker (London: Lutterworth Press, 1962), 371.

32 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 150–151.

33 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 137–138.

34 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 143.

35 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 128.

Word.”³⁶ The apostles encountered and received Christ directly, but “He does not make Himself known to us in the same way [as the apostles]. He makes Himself known to us through the collective witness of the Apostles.”³⁷ Therefore, there is no room for a theology of a faith abstracted from the historical community, since “this Word can awaken true only when it is proclaimed by the *Ekklesia*, the brotherhood, *in which alone it is vitally present*.”³⁸ “True faith is indivisibly both” invisible and visible, “[invisible] faith in Christ and [visible] existence in Christ.”³⁹

Outside the sphere of faith, which is the sphere of the historical community of faith, the fraternal *Ekklesia*, there is no salvation: faith is the condition of salvation.⁴⁰ The offer of salvation in Jesus Christ applies only to those who believe,⁴¹ and who are thereby brought into the *Ekklesia*: “faith, precisely in its fully developed form as *justifying* faith, is *always* at once both individual faith and the faith which creates the *Ekklesia* as a brotherhood in Christ.”⁴² As for those outside the visible *Ekklesia*, “just as we ought to know that God alone in Jesus Christ is the God of Grace, and outside of Jesus Christ the God of Wrath, so ought we to know that He is only gracious to him who believes, but that He is not so to him who is outside the sphere of faith.”⁴³ In this regard, Brunner concedes that many who profess non-Christian belief systems may often show a certain reverence for God, but he argues that their rejection of the Christian faith proclaimed by the *Ekklesia* demonstrates that they have not surrendered themselves completely to the loving dominion of God, desiring instead to pursue a relationship with God on their own terms. They do not acknowledge their total dependence upon God but instead affirm their own autonomy insofar as they use their religion as an instrument to affirm their self-contrived standing before God.⁴⁴

At first sight, this is a far less inclusive soteriological model than Augustine’s, since it does not allow for the possibility of salvation outside the context of the historical encounter of the human being with Jesus Christ through the witness of his *Ekklesia*. Brunner’s adoption of this position, however, does not entail the impossibility of universal salvation. In fact, for Brunner, the point of the reality of exclusion and punishment for those who do not believe is to bring the human being to the event of decision, where she is required to decide for or against God. Without the threat of exclusion and punishment, the human being’s decision for or against God has no real impact upon her destiny, and the human being is thus dehumanized by being deprived of her responsibility for her own ontological orientation, be it for or against God.⁴⁵ Because the human being is a free and respon-

36 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 174–175.

37 Brunner, *Dogmatics II*, 371.

38 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 135. Emphasis mine.

39 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 135–136.

40 Cf. Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 319.

41 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 319.

42 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 224. Emphasis mine.

43 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 353.

44 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 147–148.

45 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 334; 351.

sible creature, God respects the decision of the human being, either to accept or to reject him: “whoever excludes himself, is excluded; he who does not allow himself to be included, is not included. But he who allows himself to be included, he who believes, *is elect*.”⁴⁶

Does this mean that there are actually people who do decide definitively against God, rejecting the offer of grace, and thereby excluding themselves from the salvific grace of God? Brunner’s response to this question is: not necessarily. He states that, when we speak of the fate of unbelievers, we should always qualify them as unbelievers “*as yet*,” since “everyone who believes has passed from unbelief to belief” and therefore it is possible that the one who is now an unbeliever may become a believer.⁴⁷ According to Brunner, therefore, the state of unbelief has a certain fluidity and those who are at present “vessels of wrath” may become “the ‘saved’ at the end of the ages.”⁴⁸ Brunner acknowledges that there are biblical passages with universalistic connotations as well as biblical passages which narrate the condemnation to be endured by those who do not believe: Brunner’s attitude to these two divergent scriptural strands is to affirm that both are the Word of God and constitute a “challenge” to decision for faith, which does not necessarily imply that there are actually any people who are not saved.⁴⁹ For this reason we cannot deny the *possibility* of universal salvation.⁵⁰

Given the fact that the preponderance of humanity does not profess the Christian faith, if it is the case that the justifying faith necessary for salvation is communicated only in the context of the historical encounter of the human being with the *Ekklesia*, how is universal salvation even a possibility? Concerning this question, Brunner notes two hypotheses. First, it is possible that the consummation of history is being deliberately delayed by God because humanity is not yet converted: “who will exclude the possibility that the postponement of the end of history is the expression of a divine concern for the unreadiness of mankind?”⁵¹ Second, it is possible that one may be able to encounter Christ after death: 1 Peter 3:19 records that Christ was vivified by the Holy Spirit and by his power “preached unto the Spirits in prison,” which for Brunner suggests that “the question whether the possibility of the decision of faith is limited to *this* earthly life...remains open.”⁵² This particular possibility of post-mortem encounter, is, we recall, precisely the one which Augustine had categorically excluded. However, Brunner’s insistence upon the necessity of a personal encounter with and *acceptance* of Christ positions him to obviate Augustine’s objection to the possibility of universal salvation; namely, that it detracts from God’s judgment upon the wicked.

46 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 320. Emphasis in original.

47 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 416. Emphasis in original.

48 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 328–329. Cf. 330.

49 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 422. Cf. Emil Brunner, *Eternal Hope*, trans. Harold Knight (London: Lutterworth Press, 1954), 183.

50 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 335.

51 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 400.

52 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 320. Emphasis in original.

Affirming the possibility of universal salvation, Brunner nevertheless rejects the attempt to propose universal salvation as a theological doctrine. He develops a number of arguments against the doctrine of universal salvation, to which I now turn.

BRUNNER’S APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSAL SALVATION (2): BRUNNER’S REJECTION OF THE DOCTRINE OF UNIVERSAL SALVATION

Brunner adopts an attitude of overt suspicion towards the advocates of the doctrine of universal salvation: he considers this perspective to be heretical, and, in its modern incarnation, to be the result of the pernicious infiltration of “an optimistic self-glorifying picture of man.”⁵³ As we have seen, Brunner is quite emphatic in his affirmation of the *possibility* of universal salvation. Nevertheless, he disavows the attempt to develop a universalistic soteriology on the grounds that its dogmatization necessarily precludes “the other possibility” of damnation,⁵⁴ ‘confiscating’ from God both his freedom to elect in Jesus Christ and to reject outside Jesus Christ.⁵⁵

Brunner presents four principal arguments against the characterization of universal salvation as a doctrine (as opposed to a hypothetical possibility). These are as follows: (1) the argument from Scripture; (2) the argument from doctrinal tradition; (3) the argument from human freedom; and (4) the argument from the separation of operations of the Father and Son. We now consider these in turn.

The first principal argument in Brunner’s critique of the doctrine of universal salvation is that this doctrine departs from the “clear teaching of the New Testament”: for Brunner, to divest the New Testament message of all content referring to a “judgment of wrath” is an irresponsible “perversion of the Christian message of Salvation.”⁵⁶ Brunner summarizes his interpretation of the biblical message thus: “the Bible does not speak of universal salvation, but, on the contrary, of judgment and of a two-fold destiny: salvation and doom,”⁵⁷ adducing a list of New Testament texts which make reference to this judgment, and averring that the New Testament clearly contains this notion of final damnation for unbelievers; and that, in departing from this, the universalist proposes “a fundamental perversion of the Christian message of salvation.”⁵⁸

The second principal argument that Brunner develops is an argument from the history of doctrine. Brunner appeals to the normativity of the doctrinal tradition of the Church, and in his critique of Karl Barth’s doctrine of election, which he perceives as tending towards a universalistic soteriology, he charges Barth with

53 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 334.

54 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 335.

55 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 314.

56 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 349.

57 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 352.

58 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 349.

adopting a position “in absolute opposition...to the whole ecclesiastical tradition.”⁵⁹ This argument from tradition is developed further in Brunner’s appendix on *apokatastasis*, where he offers an abbreviated history of universalistic soteriological paradigms, stating that “the Church as a whole has recognised [them] as a heresy.” Brunner remarks that universalistic soteriological paradigms were heavily influenced by Platonist thought in antiquity, condemned by the Council of Constantinople, and only reacquired popularity from the Reformation era onwards, where they were adopted by Anabaptists, “enlightened’ thinkers” and, later, by liberal theologians like Schleiermacher. Completing his potted history of the doctrine of universal salvation in Christian tradition, Brunner concludes laconically: “this genealogy gives food for thought.”⁶⁰ Without disclosing precisely what “food for thought” Brunner has in mind, from the tone of his discourse it is abundantly evident that he is endeavoring to generate an association between universalistic soteriology and theological heresy, and his implication is that it is therefore only “natural” that one should align oneself to such a soteriological paradigm if one has no compunction about infidelity to the doctrine of the church as it has been transmitted and sustained throughout the ages, substituting, as Schleiermacher did, a “monistic type of thought” for the authentic proclamation of the New Testament.⁶¹

The third objection that Brunner raises to the doctrine of universal salvation relates to the human faculty of decision, to which we have already alluded: according to Brunner, a universalistic soteriology places exclusive emphasis on the divine election of humanity at the expense of the human being’s capacity for decision. This soteriological paradigm, which he discerns in Barth’s theology and which he terms “objectivism,” orients its focus exclusively onto the objective fact of divine salvific revelatory agency in Jesus Christ, considering the subjective element in the history of salvation, namely, the appropriation of and integration into this history of salvation through faith, to be redundant.⁶² The salient point of such a soteriological model is that God has decided for humanity and the gravity of humanity’s rejection of this decision in the act of unbelief is underemphasized to the point of immateriality: “the result is that the real decision only takes place in the objective sphere, and not in the subjective sphere. Thus: the decision has been made in Jesus Christ—for all men. Whether they know it or not, believe it or not, is not so important. The main point is that they are saved.”⁶³ To Brunner, this line of argument is suspicious as it does not allow “any room for man to make a real decision,”⁶⁴ and he entertains similar reservations concerning the Calvinistic

59 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 349. Tradition is a normative source secondary to scripture, because tradition is of a lesser standing than scripture, see Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1946), 126.

60 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 352–353.

61 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 353.

62 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 349–350.

63 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 351.

64 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 351.

doctrine of double predestination.⁶⁵ According to Brunner, there is no salvation without faith: salvation is the domain of those who have, in response to the call of Christ, made the concrete decision of faith. In order to elucidate this point, Brunner applies Luther’s radical contrast between the state of faith and the state of unbelief, arguing that the basis of the differentiation between the two states of existence is categorizable in terms of the dependence-autonomy polarity. Unbelief is characterized as autonomy: it is an attempt to live by and for oneself, to be one’s “own master,” in which one has a sense of one’s own superiority and dominion over nature and other human beings.⁶⁶ But this is antithetical to our true determination as human beings, to be found in “wholeness” and fellowship: the integrity of the human being is to be found in the acceptance of the Word of God, and “the autonomous man is in the strict sense of the word the inhuman man” because he “misses his chance of achieving his humanity...by missing his *integration* at the point where alone it can happen—namely in the Word of God.”⁶⁷ The Word of God, Jesus Christ, encounters the human being historically,⁶⁸ and in this encounter the self-seeking autonomous human being is confronted by the reality of its limitations and ultimate dependence on God, and it is called to affirm its true nature; that is, to belong to God.⁶⁹ We are all made consciously cognizant of our subterranean awareness of our rebellion against God in the state of unbelief,⁷⁰ and in the act of faith we respond to the call of Jesus Christ, accepting the objective truth of his lordship over us. “Only in faith is man’s being known as a being of the self received from the Thou...only thus has our self come to its true self...because the Lord encountered it in history in His challenging claim and the bestowal of His assurance...[through which] its true being and its true humanity are given to it. For only as a loving self—instead of a dominating, self-assertive self—can it be truly human...It cannot become a loving self by its own efforts, but only because it is ‘first loved.’”⁷¹ In the revelation-event, the human being is presented with a vision of reality in Christ, who rescues us “from the wrath of God,”⁷² and the “absolute free grace of God, purely generous love...applies to all in so far as they believe. Whoever excludes himself, is excluded...But he who allows himself to be included, he who believes, is ‘elect.’”⁷³ Universalism is a form of “cheap grace” since it does not accept the destiny-forming character of the responsible decision of the individual not to believe and not to be elect.⁷⁴

65 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 333.

66 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 140–143; 146.

67 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 146. Emphasis mine.

68 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 142.

69 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 142 & 150.

70 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 150.

71 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 145.

72 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 309. See 311 for emphasis on the individual character of this acceptance.

73 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 320.

74 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 422.

In connection with, and as a consequence of, this accentuation of the subjective-receptive dimension of the economy of salvation, Brunner distances himself from the doctrine of infant baptism. Brunner questions the value of baptism itself, but he affirms that whatever salvific function it may have, its efficacy is undoubtedly contingent upon faith.⁷⁵ He claims that, for Paul, baptism was extrinsic to the faithful response of the human being to God; and that Paul's teaching is irreconcilable with the practice of infant baptism.⁷⁶ Consequently, Brunner pronounces his unambiguous theological sympathies with the Anabaptists on this issue, contending that the real reason for their ecclesiastical marginalization was the inextricable connection between the doctrine of infant baptism and the doctrine of the state church.⁷⁷ Implicit in this assertion is the notion that, with the emergence of a secular state, infant baptism serves no discernible purpose, a conclusion which Brunner embraces, writing that "men of today, at least, have no time for a Church which on the one side indiscriminately baptizes every child...and on the other side preaches justification by faith alone."⁷⁸ In other words, baptism, insofar as it is conceived in soteriological perspective, must for Brunner express the individual's response in faith.

For Brunner, the decision of a human individual for God is grounded in the act of God in his self-revelation in Jesus Christ, which issues from his gracious love for humanity and desire to be with human beings, and, potentially (subject to the universal reception of Jesus Christ in faith), with all humanity. The salient feature of this soteriological paradigm, and the one which introduces us to Brunner's fourth major objection, is the relationship between the Father and the Son in Brunner's theology. Brunner's fourth principal objection to the doctrine of universal salvation is that it depends upon a Christomonism which neglects the complex internal dynamic of the relations between the Father and the Son.⁷⁹ For Brunner, it is correct to state that God loves humanity in Christ; that is to say, when as Christians we encounter God through Jesus Christ, we meet the God of reconciling love who imparts himself to us through the mediation of Jesus Christ.⁸⁰ However, God is not only a God of reconciling love. Brunner repudiates the classical Trinitarian formulation *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* ('the exterior works of the Trinity are indivisible'),⁸¹ arguing that the Father has allocated certain reconciling functions to the Son but has also reserved the functions of

75 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 55.

76 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 54.

77 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 56.

78 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 98. Brunner also claims to leave the question of infant baptism open (cf. 78); there is, however, no reason whatsoever to suggest that he actually does so.

79 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 315.

80 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 199 & 214.

81 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 232–234. "There are works of the Father, which are most certainly not the works of the Son." Brunner does claim that the classical formula *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* "must...be used with extreme caution," which would appear to suggest a qualified approval of the formula; however, in his procedure it is beyond dispute that Brunner completely abandons this cardinal dogmatic principle.

judgment and condemnation to himself.⁸² This enables him to construct a concept of God which accounts for both the love of God in Jesus Christ and God's wrath outside Jesus Christ. Let us consider this further.

In his articulation of the operational separation of the Father and the Son, Brunner relies extensively on Luther's distinction between the *deus revelatus* ('revealed God') and the *deus absconditus* ('hidden God'): the *deus revelatus* designates the loving God as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ; whereas the *deus absconditus* designates the wrathful God, the Father as he is in himself, *distinct* from his act of self-revelation, and *distinct* from the Son. We encounter this wrathful God if we seek God outside of Christ.⁸³ Brunner also describes these two modalities of divine agency by means of Luther's concepts of the *deus nudus* ('the naked God') and the *deus velatus* ('the veiled God'): we are unable to experience the magnificence of God in itself, so in revelation his "terrible majesty is graciously veiled... He makes Himself finite and knowable for our sakes."⁸⁴ There is a fundamental conceptual unity between these two polarities: the *deus nudus* is the *deus absconditus* and the *deus velatus* is the *deus revelatus*; the God who does not reveal himself is the God of naked majesty and power, and the God who does reveal himself is the one who reveals himself in mystery, "in this veiled form as love."⁸⁵

One might enquire how God can dispose himself in two radically disjunctive ways towards his creation, and it is this distinction between the *deus revelatus* and the *deus absconditus* that underpins Brunner's schematization of the divine 'disposition' towards the world. God is the Holy One, that is, the separate, exalted one.⁸⁶ In his act of self-revelation in Jesus Christ, his holiness attaches itself to, and is concretely expressed as, Love: when the Father has dealings with the world in and through Jesus Christ, the love-modality of his holiness is operative.⁸⁷ This love-modality of the divine self-disposition towards humanity in revelation in Jesus Christ is not discontinuous with the being of the Father in himself but rather constitutes the concrete expression of the being of the Father: "God the Father is really He who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ. When Jesus Christ, in His Holy and Merciful authority, speaks to us as 'I,' the Holy and Merciful God Himself is really speaking to us. God is the One who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ as the God *for us*. The love of Jesus is really the love of God. Thus God is not merely the Loving One in His relation to us, but in Himself He is Love."⁸⁸ On the other hand, when the Father has dealings with the world outside of this revelation in Jesus Christ, his holiness attaches itself to wrath. The divine work of salvation is God's *opus proprium* ('own work') and his work of wrath is his *opus alienum* ('other

82 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 232.

83 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 170.

84 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 171.

85 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 172.

86 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 158–160.

87 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 353.

88 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 227–228.

work' or 'alien work') which he undertakes "*cogente malitia hominum*" ('in light of human evil'); that is, in response to the rejection of his loving dominion which unbelief entails.⁸⁹ In the case of the love-modality of the divine self-disposition in revelation, i.e., in his *opus proprium*, God reveals himself as he really is, but in this *opus alienum*, we do not have a real encounter with God, and we do not see God as he really is.⁹⁰ In this connection, Brunner approvingly cites Luther's remarks attributing the operation of the divine wrath to the obstinacy of human unbelief: "he must make use of his sword...[to] crush those who try to resist his rule and his peaceful government, or to do harm to his people. But in his hall and in his castle there is nothing but mercy and love."⁹¹

To summarize the principal elements of Brunner's critique of universalistic soteriology: according to Brunner, a theology of universal salvation (1) contradicts the message of the Bible; (2) departs from the doctrinal tradition of the Church; (3) results in an objectivism which does not give due emphasis to the responsibility of the human in the shaping of its destiny before God; and (4) does not take account of the separation of operations of the Father and the Son.

DISCUSSION

There is a great deal about Brunner's position which is to be commended. I have already noted how Brunner's position represents an inversion of Augustine's position, and this inversion is significant because it attempts to do justice to the historicity of human experience. Brunner's emphasis upon the historical mediation of faith through the *Ekklesia* follows directly from the affirmation of the historicity of the human being, avoiding the atomized conception of grace which conceives of grace embracing the atomized individual human being in abstraction from her situation in the world. Such an atomized conception of faith leads to an atomized conception of salvation, which does not take adequate cognizance of the fact that in the redemption of humanity Jesus Christ calls the human being not into a state of individual enrapturement but into his own communal, corporate reality which exists concretely in the world as the Kingdom of God, and the intrinsically social character of the Christian vocation is key to Brunner's understanding of the Kingdom of God: "The final realization of His will is the coming of His Kingdom, the coming of that which brings humanity and history to their consummation. This is the basic content of the word *basileia tou theou*—God's kingly rule...The sovereignty of God is present in the Person of Jesus Christ. The realm where Christ's sovereignty is immediately exercised is the *Ekklesia*, meaning the fellowship of those who have their new life in Christ...Life in the Spirit is above all life in *agape*—life in a love that is not merely enjoined upon us and of which we are conscious only that it is obligatory, but a present life in the love which through

89 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 230.

90 Brunner, *Dogmatics II*, 180.

91 Luther in Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 174.

faith in Christ has become a reality in the life of the *Ekklesia* brotherhood. For through this faith man is changed from one who lives for himself into one who lives for God and his brother."⁹²

Brunner's third chief argument against universalism, according to which the doctrine of universal salvation divests humanity of its charge to responsibility, represents a clear corrective to the objectivism which Brunner justifiably detects in Barth's earlier writings. An objectivist soteriology, as Brunner notes, concentrates entirely on the objective character of the Christ-event and does not factor in the subjective response as a co-determinant in the salvation history of the human being, which inevitably detracts from the freedom of humanity. Brunner seeks to safeguard the human capacity "to make a real decision,"⁹³ and he argues that any doctrine of universalism or predestination of necessity sacrifices this capacity.⁹⁴ This element of Brunner's argumentation is, in my opinion, both the strongest one and the one which exhibits the most theological coherence as well as consistency with his own theological method. Furthermore, it is plausible that Barth, at whom this criticism was primarily directed, adjusted his quasi-universalistic framework in his later theology to take account of Brunner's objection, acknowledging that the doctrine of universal salvation trivializes the threat of damnation which humanity faces.⁹⁵ For the later Barth, in the history of the salvation of humanity there is a subjective determination (sinfulness) which becomes realigned in the act of the faith in concert with the objective determination of the human being (obedience), and which is the destiny of humanity, but which may or may not be realized.⁹⁶

Nevertheless, there are a number of reservations about Brunner's critique of the doctrine of universal salvation related to its consistency with his overarching theological method and assessment of the order of normativity of doctrinal sources. Furthermore, there are a number of concerns about the consequences of Brunner's argumentation for the Christian doctrine of God.

For example, in his first argument against the doctrine of universal salvation, Brunner remonstrates with the proponent of a universalistic soteriology on the basis that the doctrine of universal salvation departs from the scriptural testimony. This alone, according to Brunner, should be perfectly sufficient to

92 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 362–363. On the other hand, in light of Brunner's argument from doctrinal tradition against the doctrine of universal salvation, it is debatable whether Brunner's concern for the modern concept of historicity merits his clear departure from the dogmatic tradition affirming the operation of salvific grace outside the bounds of the visible Church, a doctrine professed almost universally in the history of the dogmatic tradition.

93 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 351.

94 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 338.

95 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, IV/3-1, The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 477.

96 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, IV/3-1*, 469 & 477–478. There is room to object that Barth only permitted of a subordinate subjective determination and not the co-ordinate subjective determination upon which Brunner insisted.

disarm the universalist: “there is one point which even they cannot gainsay: that in so doing Karl Barth is in absolute opposition, not only to the whole ecclesiastical tradition, but—and *this alone is the final objection to it*—to the clear teaching of the New Testament.”⁹⁷ However, in his discussion of the question of universal salvation, Brunner presupposes (1) an absolute dogmatic normativity for the Bible, in addition to (2) a conceptual unity to the Bible in terms of its doctrinal message, neither of which has any foundation in his theological methodology, and which, if present, would by Brunner’s own logic commit him to an overt repudiation of the mere possibility of universal salvation, an assertion he does not venture. Brunner’s insistence upon the absolute normative character of scripture in his approach to the doctrine of universal salvation stands in tension with his theological method, because Brunner adopts a radically different orientation to scripture at the outset of his *Dogmatics* in the section entitled *Prolegomena: The Basis and the Task of Dogmatics*. In this methodological section, Brunner does accept a scriptural normativity, but he proceeds to repudiate the notion of “absolute” scriptural normativity, claiming that “the word of Scripture is not the final court of appeal, since Jesus Christ Himself alone is this ultimate authority.”⁹⁸ Brunner offers a most instructive account of why this is the case: the Scriptures are not themselves the Word of God, but instead witness to the Word of God (Jesus Christ), who is “the real norm” of Christian doctrine.⁹⁹ In the act of apostolic witness, Brunner explains, the scriptures are composed by a circle of authors, all of whom are grasped by the reality of Jesus Christ and who report their encounter with this reality *refractively*, by which he means, according to the conceptual categories of their own limited, individual, historically conditioned perspectives. Most significantly, the apostles do not all share the same ‘catalogue’ of *propositional* insights, but only the *existential* insight that we have encountered God in the event of Jesus Christ, and Brunner is quite ardent in his insistence that there is *no unified biblical system of doctrine*, stating that “the doctrines of the New Testament to a great extent *differ* from one another,” from which he concludes that “the unity of the witness of the New Testament...lies solely and alone in Him, the One who is confessed, but *not in the teaching of the witnesses*.”¹⁰⁰ “Only those who hold an obstinately doctrinaire view” can deny such differences among the teaching of the apostles in the New Testament.¹⁰¹

This has important repercussions for Brunner’s appeal to a monolithic biblical witness in his repudiation of the doctrine of universal salvation, since this appeal runs directly counter to the critical christocentric hermeneutic which he establishes in the methodological section of his work. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the Bible contains such a uniform teaching against universal salvation, since Brunner himself repudiates the notion of a biblical consensus against

97 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 349.

98 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 47.

99 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 47.

100 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 46–47. Emphasis mine. Cf. 68.

101 Brunner, *Dogmatics II*, 248–249.

universal salvation when he states that there are “passages in the Bible which speak of universal salvation,” which nevertheless “failed to make an impact”; that is, which failed to acquire significant following in the early Church tradition.¹⁰² Brunner’s argumentation, therefore, is demonstrably inconsistent in this context, because his Biblicist treatment of the question of universal salvation is antithetical to the hermeneutical approach he establishes and seeks to pursue in his *Dogmatics*. Therefore, if one wishes to remain faithful to Brunner’s overarching theological method and scriptural hermeneutic, one cannot accept Brunner’s claim that an alleged biblical consensus against universal salvation, whose existence Brunner himself repudiates at certain points, is by itself “the final objection” that dogmatically invalidates the proposition.¹⁰³

The second principal argument which Brunner deploys against the doctrine of universal salvation is the appeal to ecclesiastical tradition. I have recounted how Brunner undertakes to cast a suspicious light upon the proponent of universalism by reference to its marginalized character within Christian doctrine throughout history, which he accomplishes by associating the doctrine with its heterodox antecedents. Like his biblical appeal, this traditionalism represents a remarkable volte-face, discontinuous with his fundamental approach to theology. To turn again to the *Prolegomena* of the *Dogmatics*, Brunner dismisses the Church’s claims to absolute dogmatic authority with great suspicion: dogma is not the “final authority, forcing...[one] to suppress his own view entirely.”¹⁰⁴ Brunner contends that the task of the theologian is to approach the dogma of the Church critically: “The Church should...[give] its recognized teachers...every facility for the critical examination of their present Confession of Faith, in order to extend its scope. Thus the theologian stands on the threshold which both separates the existing Confession of Faith from the future, improved Confession, and also serves as the point of transition from the one to the other. His point of departure is the existing Confession of faith; but before him there stands the ‘given’ revelation in the Scriptures.”¹⁰⁵ The theologian is charged not to accept dogmatic tradition uncritically, but to examine and to improve it: “there falls to dogmatics a second task, namely, that of *critically examining the dogma which the Church lays before it, and, when necessary, of providing a better dogma*.”¹⁰⁶ On the basis of this relativized concept of the normativity of Church doctrine and the mandate to pursue a critical examination of the dogmatic tradition, the doctrinal consensus of the Church against universal salvation does not constitute a conclusive argument, since it implicitly attributes a normative function to Church authority which Brunner would instinctively repudiate.¹⁰⁷ It is true that, for Brunner, dogma has a *certain* normativity, but this

102 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 422.

103 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 349.

104 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 53.

105 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 57–58.

106 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 80.

107 Unlike his argument from scripture, however, Brunner does not appear to claim that the argument from tradition represents a conclusive argument.

is subordinate to the Bible which itself only has a relative normativity and which is bound by the absolute normativity of Jesus Christ.

This line of argument also has negative repercussions for Brunner's theology as a whole, for, if we were to apply this argument from tradition to Brunner's theology, we could find at least six significant junctures at which his formulation of Christian doctrine could be deemed suspect: (1) the repudiation of infant baptism; (2) the repudiation of the identification of the Bible with the Word of God; (3) the repudiation of the Trinitarian formula, *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*; (4) the affirmation of the mere *possibility* of universal salvation; (5) the repudiation of the possibility of justifying faith in history which does not bring the justified human being into the visible Church; and (6) the affirmation of the possibility of one's accepting Christ after death.

Moving onto the concept of God which Brunner's critique requires, Brunner's doctrine of the divine nature, or more accurately, its interior disposition, is a matter for serious concern. Brunner, as I have indicated, rejects the classical formulation *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*: he contends that this formulation leads inexorably to 'Christian Monism,' which for him is the basis of universalism, since it does not take account of the separation of functions in the interior disposition of God. According to Brunner it is necessary "to make a clear distinction between the works which God does in and through the Son, from those which He does outside the Son of his Love."¹⁰⁸

Hayes points out that Brunner's argument that the Father reserves all judgment to himself is simply unscriptural, since there are biblical texts which clearly assign the faculty of judgment to the Son. Furthermore, Hayes alludes to how this characterization of the relation between the Father and the Son could be problematic: "Brunner himself is, perhaps, on dangerous grounds in his criticism...is the ontological ground of this dialectic truly, as he believes, the separation of the Father from the Son?"¹⁰⁹ It is the theological problems entailed by his characterization of the internal relations of the Trinity that I now wish to explore.

The first observation that I should like to make is methodological: Brunner's conception of the separation of divine functions does not follow from his reflections on the nature of Trinitarian doctrine. The doctrine of the Trinity is, for Brunner, a problem for dogmatic theology and is not to be considered an integral component of the faith: "it does not belong to the sphere of the Church's message."¹¹⁰ According to Brunner, it is only in the event of divine revelation that we catch a glimpse into the true nature of God as self-giving love: "the knowledge of God as our Father is the work of the Son, and is the counterpart of the truth

108 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 233–234.

109 Hayes, *Emil Brunner*, 53.

110 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 206.

that Jesus is the Son of the Father."¹¹¹ Brunner argues that we should express reserve when reflecting upon the doctrine of the Trinity; and that "we must give up the endeavour to construct a doctrine of the relation between the 'Trinitarian persons,'" because this leads to tritheism.¹¹² Brunner also objects to the undertaking on phenomenological grounds: he holds that "to make the mutual relation of the three persons within the Trinity a subject of theological discussion" is impossible as the pre-existence of Christ is "the *final* term" in the process of reflective faith.¹¹³

Brunner's procedure vis-à-vis reflection upon the Trinity, however, is inconsistent with the theological methodology he prescribes. On the one hand, he argues that reflecting upon the interior disposition of the Godhead, that is, upon their relations to one another, is a perilous undertaking, while on the other hand, he proceeds to conduct such a reflection by constructing a model of the relation between God and the world which is in essence predicated upon the *tangential character* of the relation between the Father and the Son: *in certain cases, the Father acts through the Son, but in other cases, he acts alone*. Whether Brunner is aware of this or not, this characterization already claims a great deal about the interior disposition of the Godhead, and, tragically, although Brunner's eschewal of the attempt to construct a Trinitarian doctrine may have been grounded in reservations about the potentially tritheistic doctrine that would result, he ends up venturing *into the same conceptual territory* as the tritheist by separating the operations of the Father and Son.

Moving on from purely methodological concerns, Brunner's principal theological claim is that God the Father acts in concert with the Son to effect salvation but alone to effect damnation. He grounds this, as we have already seen, in the notion of the divine as the Holy One, whose holiness attaches itself to love in Jesus Christ and to wrath outside Jesus Christ. This position, I argue, is unsustainable on the basis of Brunner's own concept of God. Let us explore this. For Brunner, holiness means separateness, distinctness, but this implies separation *from* something else: holiness entails that "He is Wholly Other against all else."¹¹⁴ For this reason, "holiness [has to] merge into love": love, concretized as the act of divine self-revelation, stems from the nature of God as the Holy One who wishes to be recognised as such by otherness and to share his very self with otherness.¹¹⁵ "The Love of God...[is] *the fundamental nature of God*. God's *nature* is the radiation of spiritual energy, *an energy which is the will to impart himself*."¹¹⁶ If it is the case that the divine love, the self-impartative volition, is sourced in the nature of God itself, then what can one say of wrath? Does this also have a source in God?

111 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 208.

112 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 226–227.

113 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 225.

114 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 160.

115 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 190.

116 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 192. Emphasis mine.

Brunner claims that the Father exercises his wrath without the mediation of Jesus Christ in response to humanity's failure to acknowledge his holiness. This raises a major dogmatic problem which, apart from its grounding in the separation of the divine functions, relies upon two mutually sustaining positions which are theologically suspect: the state of potency of God and the mutability of God. Brunner argues that the Father's act of condemnation of those outside Jesus Christ is an *opus alienum*, in which God does not encounter personally but impersonally through the judgment of the law.¹¹⁷ But it is debatable whether one can speak coherently of a *dei opus alienum* in the first place, since this attributes a contingent element to divine agency: if one wishes to categorize the divine act of wrath as a *dei opus alienum* in the way that Brunner does, one is committed to the proposition that the divine nature, impeded in its fundamental act of self-expression (love) by human sin, is itself conditioned by the unfavorable human response to divine self-revelation *to the extent that its agency acquires a completely different modality*, a modality of exclusion (wrath), in which *the divine nature qua self-impartative volition is radically subverted*. This leads one to enquire whether this is consistent with Brunner's conception of God as "Absolute Subject."¹¹⁸ This stands in tension with the doctrine of the immutability of God and thus runs directly counter to the biblical doctrine of God.¹¹⁹ Brunner attempts to reconcile this characterization of divine wrath with the immutability of God by adducing Luther's claim that God "must make use of his sword...[to] crush those who try to resist his rule and his peaceful government, or to do harm to his people. But in his hall and in his castle there is nothing but mercy and love."¹²⁰ However, for this characterization to be reconciled with the doctrine of the immutability of God, the act of wrath would have to constitute an *expression* of the modality of divine agency as holiness attached to love and not a *subversion* of this modality. We saw how Augustine obviated this problem by insisting that any language about wrath in God did not refer to God in himself but simply to the effect of divine providence upon his creatures, and Brunner's radical departure from Augustine's framework at this juncture means that it is a challenge for him to uphold the immutability of God, since God's action without Jesus Christ is characterized as holiness which attaches itself to wrath rather than love, a self-disposition which by Brunner's own argumentation can be seen to be inconsistent with the fundamental nature of God as self-giving love.

Ultimately, Brunner's concept of the wrathful nature of the agency of the Father without Jesus Christ renders Brunner's concept of God in revelation meaningless. Brunner states that "God the Father is really He who reveals Himself in

117 Brunner, *Dogmatics II*, 120.

118 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 239. One could theoretically answer that God has limited his power in creation (cf. Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 251.), but I should note that, for Brunner, this self-limitation originates in the nature of God himself and is not adscititiously imposed upon him—there is no sacrifice of the nature of God.

119 See Ps. 102: 27 & Mal. 3:6.

120 Luther in Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 174.

Jesus Christ. When Jesus Christ, in His Holy and Merciful authority, speaks to us as 'I,' the Holy and Merciful God Himself is really speaking to us. God is the One who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ as the God *for us*. The love of Jesus is really the love of God. Thus God is not merely the Loving One in His relation to us, but in Himself He is Love.¹²¹ However, in consideration both of his claims about the operational separation of the Father and the Son and of the wrathful modalization of the Father's agency outside Jesus Christ, it is completely devoid of meaning to claim that "God the Father is really He who reveals Himself in Jesus Christ," since it appears that God does not actually reveal *himself* (*deus nudus*) in Jesus Christ but rather a veiled, contingent modality of his nature (*deus velatus*). Brunner criticizes Calvin's doctrine of double predestination on the grounds that it means that we cannot worship God truly as the God of love,¹²² but it is debatable whether Brunner's articulation of the distinction of operations in the Trinity permits us to call the Father the God of love, since it appears that he is only the God of love when he is *velatus* in Jesus Christ.¹²³

Brunner's polarization of the modality of the agency of the Father acting with the Son against the modality of the agency of the Father acting alone also points to a soteriological problem of the utmost significance. Brunner's doctrine of God, by dividing the works of the Father from those of the Son, dissolves the ontological unity of the Trinity and provides dogmatic theology no basis for reflection upon God as an *integral subject*. This raises a serious concern, because Brunner claims that the call of humanity to Christian discipleship is a call to attain the integrity of its being: the fallen man, he writes, "misses his chance of achieving true humanity...for by missing his integration at the point where alone it can happen—namely in the *Word* of God—he becomes disintegrated man, who has fallen both from his own wholeness and from fellowship...The man who is not founded in love is also unable to love, he must seek to achieve domination."¹²⁴ Here Brunner claims that the personal affirmation of Jesus Christ communicates two character-

121 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 227–228.

122 Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 331.

123 Brunner derives most of his theological material in this context from Luther, and I suspect that Brunner's primary weakness is his application of the doctrine of the *deus absconditus* to the objective sphere (ontology) when it is only applicable to the subjective sphere (epistemology). Brunner remarks that philosophical reflection in and of itself can only lead to a wrathful, annihilating concept of God, and that it is impossible to arrive at a loving God when we commence with the notion of God as "Absolute", see Brunner, *Dogmatics I*, 171 & 187. However, to proceed from this point of departure to the supposition that God is actually a wrathful God when he is encountered outside revelation is to transform an epistemological truth, a truth of subjective reason, into an ontological truth, a truth of objective reason, which is wholly unwarranted, and which, I hasten to add, radically contradicts Brunner's hamartiologico-epistemological framework which denies that we can arrive at *any* truth about God without divine revelation: he writes that "the ascent of the soul to God is a false path, the *itinerarium mentis in Deum* does not end in the Living God, but in the abstract *ens realissimum* of Neoplatonist speculation; the true God can be known *only* by His coming down to us...rational knowledge itself does not give us *any* access to that Wisdom of God." Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, 319–321.

124 Brunner, *Dogmatics III*, 146.

istics to the human being: (1) integrity; and (2) love. However, Brunner's doctrine of the agentive separability of the Father and the Son, which implies the contingent character of the agentive co-operation between the members of the Trinity, entails that, since the Trinity is not constituted integrally, it cannot conceivably be positioned to confer integrity upon human beings in the event of revelation. This also applies to love: if God is not really love in his primordial (*nudus*) state but only in his veiled (*velatus*) state, this necessitates the accidentalization of the love-modality of divine agency, which means that it is also meaningless to claim that God shares his being as love with us, for he is not primordially a loving being in the first place.

Incredibly, despite Brunner's assertion that Calvin's doctrine of double predestination does not enable us to confess the Father as a God of love, Calvin's doctrine of double predestination may represent a more theologically satisfactory account of salvation and damnation, since in Calvin's doctrine of double predestination there is no implication of a fundamental discontinuity between the redemptive agency of God in Jesus Christ and the condemnatory agency of God outside Jesus Christ: all events are subject to divine providence, which is guided by divine love. In his *Institutes*, Calvin insists that this providential concern includes God's predestination of sinners to damnation, writing: "by God's *providence* man has been created to undergo that calamity [of damnation]."¹²⁵ By his providence, God "make[s] good even out of evil,"¹²⁶ and divine providence does not operate solely to the benefit of the *soi-disant* 'elect,' but "strives to the end that God may reveal his concern for the whole human race"¹²⁷; even in the mire of sin, death, and damnation, this divine providential grace is at work in the world, giving each creature the "impulsion" to act.¹²⁸ Divine providence is not something which occurs only at certain junctures: it is "the determinative principle for all human works and plans,"¹²⁹ precisely because God so loves the entire world and all the creatures within it that "it is his care to govern *all* creatures *for their own good and safety*, and *even the devil himself*."¹³⁰ This means, in accordance with Calvin's providential doctrine of predestination, that even in the fires of hell, God's dealings with the condemned in no wise imply that he ceases to love and to care for them: according to Calvin's doctrine of double predestination, the condemnation of the reprobate is to be conceived as a function of this providential care. None of this commits Calvin to the doctrine of universal salvation, but what it does is safeguard the integrity of God in his dealings with humanity: in accordance with Calvin's position, just because humanity turns against God in sin and refuses to accept his offer of fellowship, this does not mean that God, in the dealings he has with the fallen

125 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 958. Emphasis mine.

126 Calvin, *Institutes*, 235.

127 Calvin, *Institutes*, 210.

128 Calvin, *Institutes*, 232.

129 Calvin, *Institutes*, 232.

130 Calvin, *Institutes*, 219. Emphasis mine.

creature who condemns himself, ceases to orchestrate his own agency in accordance with his nature as love, even if God accepts the creature's refusal to be elect. As Augustine states, the wrath of God "indicate[s] the *effect* of His vengeance, *rather than any disturbance to which He is subject*."¹³¹ Accordingly, perhaps it would have been judicious for Brunner, in the articulation of his critique of the doctrine of universal salvation, not to have dismissed the contribution of Calvin's doctrine of double predestination so precipitously.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have explicated Emil Brunner's approach to the question of universal salvation. I have argued that Brunner's position represents a clear inversion of Augustine's position: whereas Augustine accepts the concept of an invisible Church, but rejects the possibility of universal salvation, Brunner insists upon the concrete historicity of Christian faith whilst remaining open to the possibility of universal salvation. I have drawn attention to the principal objections Brunner has lodged against the doctrine of universal salvation, suggesting that several of them are radically inconsistent with the theological method he himself proposes.¹³² Furthermore, I have argued that Brunner's doctrine of the agentive separability of the Father from the Son generates serious problems for his doctrine of God which may not have arisen if he had drawn upon the providential foundation of Calvin's doctrine of double predestination.

131 Augustine, *City of God*, 366.

132 I have done so without overtly endorsing either the objections or the theological method: my intent here was merely to draw attention to the logical relation between these two elements, and a treatment of the cogency of Brunner's theological method will have to wait for another occasion.