

CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

EMIL BRUNNER'S THEOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE  
CONCEPT OF DIVINE ACTION

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

JAMES NORMAN MAYER

GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

MARCH 2010



CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

3233 Burton SE • Grand Rapids, Michigan • 49546-4387

616 957-6036 fax: 616 957-8621

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This dissertation entitled

**EMIL BRUNNER'S THEOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION  
TO THE CONCEPT OF DIVINE ACTION**

written by

**JAMES NORMAN MAYER**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

has been accepted by the faculty of Calvin Theological Seminary

upon the recommendation of the undersigned readers:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Ronald J. Feenstra, Ph.D.

\_\_\_\_\_  
John Bolt, Ph.D.

\_\_\_\_\_  
John W. Cooper, Ph.D.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Edward Wierenga, Ph.D.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Henry De Moor, Th.D. *olim*  
Vice President for Academic Affairs

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to Ronald Feenstra for his encouragement and constant guidance from beginning to end. Thanks also to the Calvin Theological Seminary community for being a home away from home for eight years. Many thanks to Greg Schuringa, Brian Lee, and Jerry Stutzman for listening to me think out loud. Of course, I could not have done this without Laurie. Her support through word, deed, and even silence is a constant reminder of God's activity in my life. Thank you.

## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Through a careful examination of Emil Brunner's theology, this dissertation shows that when the concept of divine action is be examined in the context of the nature and work of God, the idea that God acts can be better understood.

After a brief introductory chapter, chapter 2 argues that contemporary discussions surprisingly fail to consider what God does and what God is like as possible resources for making sense of problems associated with the concept of God's activity. This chapter also suggests that a model of divine action should take into account the means, manner, effect, purpose, extent, and degree of God's activity. Investigating the nature and work of God could prove useful for constructing a clear concept of divine action.

Chapter 3 briefly introduces scholarship on Brunner and examines his theological writings regarding the nature of God. This chapter argues that Brunner's discussion on the nature and attributes of God—such as God's name, love, lordship and holiness—helps make sense of God's activity by illuminating the manner, effect, purpose, and intention of God's activity.

Chapter 4 shows that Brunner's theological thought on God's work in creation, providence, and redemption illuminates the relation between divine and human action. Typically, scholarship focuses on divine concurrence, but examining claims about God's work in creation and redemption and God's original intention to have communion with creation helps clarify our understanding of the extent and degree of God's activity in relation to human activity.

Chapter 5 shows that Brunner's thought on God's creative work and lordship helps make sense of the relation between divine action and natural processes. This relation does not preclude particular acts of God including special or extraordinary activities such as miracles and redemptive acts. Nor do natural processes preclude God from acting through the ordinary workings of nature.

Finally, this dissertation shows that the concept of divine action forms part of the fabric of a wider theological framework that is essential for making sense of the notion that God acts in the world. Thus, scholarship needs to take this framework seriously when considering the notion that God acts.



## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION TO A THEOLOGY OF DIVINE ACTION

#### 1. Introduction to the Dissertation

This is a dissertation on the topic of divine action. Scholars past and present have wrestled with questions such as these: “How should we understand God’s activity in the world?”, “How could it be that God acts?”, and “What is God’s relation to the world?” During the past forty years or so, there has been an intensification of scholarship on the topic of divine action.<sup>1</sup> This scholarship attempts to make sense of the notion that God acts in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> The following are some of the most important and interesting works on divine action. Paul Gwynne, *Special Divine Action: Key Issues in the Contemporary Debate* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1996); Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002); Nicholas Saunders, *Divine Action and Modern Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Thomas V. Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson, eds., *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990); Owen C. Thomas, ed., *God’s Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983); Gordon Kaufman, “On the Meaning of ‘Act of God,’” *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968): 175-201; Christoph Schwöbel, *God: Action and Revelation* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1992); Mats J. Hansson, *Understanding an Act of God: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Uppsala: Doctoral dissertation at Uppsala University, 1991); Maurice Wiles, *God’s Action in the World* (London: SCM Press, 1986); Thomas F. Tracy, *God, Action, and Embodiment* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984); Thomas F. Tracy, ed., *The God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, C. J. Isham, eds., *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1999); Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger and Francisco J. Ayala, eds., *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1998); Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger and George V. Coyne, eds., *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding* (Vatican State City: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1988); Vernon White, *The Fall of a Sparrow: A Concept of Special Divine Action* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1985).

As Langdon Gilkey noted at the beginning of this wave of scholarship, scholars have had trouble giving a theological account for their confessional approach to divine action.<sup>2</sup> All that modern theology has been able to affirm is a doctrine of general providence, divine acts of judgment and grace, and that God sometimes brings about good from evil that God has not caused.<sup>3</sup> Part of the problem, argued Gilkey, is that scholars have given up presuppositions about biblical truth claims that gave rise to the concept in the first place. As a result, if the claims of Christian scriptures are suspect, then so are claims about God's activity in the world.

Quite surprisingly, even the most recent discussions have had trouble giving an account of divine action. Thus, Gilkey's claim turned out to be prophetic as well. The problem of evil, creaturely autonomy and freedom, and claims of modern science continue to challenge what scholars can say about God's activity in the world. As a result, contemporary scholars mostly study the concept of divine action in philosophical and scientific contexts, addressing these challenges. This has opened a theological void. At best, recent attempts to understand the concept of divine action offer abridged models that fail to consider potentially vital elements to models of divine action. In other words,

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<sup>2</sup> Langdon B. Gilkey, "The Concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 43 (July 1963): 171-192. Also see Gilkey's "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *The Journal of Religion* 41 (July 1961): 194-205. These problems will be explored further in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

<sup>3</sup> Gilkey, "The Concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology," 179.

what is so surprising is that scholars abstract the concept of divine action from its religious and theological roots.

The next chapter of this dissertation will unpack the preceding claim. It argues that contemporary discussions surprisingly fail to consider what God does and what God is like as possible resources for making sense of problems associated with the concept of God's activity. The remaining chapters apply and appropriate some of the work of Emil Brunner to some issues that arise in general discussion of divine action. This part of the dissertation makes a contribution to scholarship on divine action by investigating specific claims of Emil Brunner about what God does and what God is like and the value of these claims for making sense of the concept of divine action.

In short, this dissertation shows that the concept of divine action forms part of the fabric of a wider theological framework that is essential for making sense of the notion that God acts in the world. Thus, scholarship needs to take this framework seriously when considering the notion that God acts. If scholarship does not take this theological framework seriously, then models of divine action are necessarily deficient.

## **2. Introduction to Divine Action**

The concept of divine action refers to what God does. This concept includes a wide range of claims about God's activity such as God's initial activity in creation, God's continuous activity in redemption, and God's future activity in the consummation. The concept of divine action also refers to what is commonly called divine providence, that is,

that general activity whereby God sustains and governs the cosmos. In addition, the concept of divine action refers to what is sometimes called *special* providence or *special* divine action whereby God acts in *extraordinary* ways. That is, the phrase “special divine action” or “special providence” can sometimes refer to acts of God that are of a different kind or sort than how God typically acts. These special acts are often referred to as miracles. Finally, the concept of divine action sometimes refers to what God says and reveals.

Aspects of God’s activity are sometimes differentiated. Divine action is a concept that incorporates various aspects of God’s activity—such as miracles, revelation, answered prayer, and creation—but these aspects are also distinguishable. For example, although God’s providential activity can be considered an instance of divine action, divine providence is not necessarily an instance of God’s creative activity. Thus, the concept of divine action can include the concept of a God who created and continues to sustain the cosmos, governs it according to his plan, and intervenes in its history. But the concept of divine action can also refer to just one of those aspects.

It should also be noted that this dissertation will make various assumptions about who God is. This is a dissertation in the context of *Christian* theology, and so it is the Christian God, the God of the Old Testament and of the New Testament scriptures, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Ruth, and Paul, that is being assumed in this discussion. Nevertheless, the notion of divine action is also pertinent in other religious traditions (e.g., Judaism and Islam), and so this dissertation is also relevant outside of Christianity.

### 3. The Importance of Divine Action

This section explores some reasons as to why the concept of divine action is an important topic. It will be shown that ecumenical creeds and statements of the Christian faith, Christian beliefs and doctrines, Christian practice, and Scripture all make assumptions about what God does. And in order for God to do these things, God must act. This section concludes by briefly considering the results of a Harris poll.

First, the concept of divine action seems implicit in certain ecumenical creeds and statements of Christian faith. For example, the Apostles' Creed claims that God the Father created the heavens and the earth, and it states that Jesus Christ was resurrected, he ascended into heaven, and that Christ will come to judge the living and the dead. Although the Apostles' Creed does not directly address the concept of divine action, God's activity is implicit in the Creed, and the verbs 'descended,' 'rose,' 'ascended,' 'will come,' and 'judge' assume God's activity.

Other ecumenical creeds and statements of Christian faith are similar to the Apostles' Creed in this respect. That is, God's activity is implicit in other ecumenical creeds (e.g., the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed) and statements of the Christian faith (e.g., the Augsburg Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England). Thus, on the basis of these creeds and statements of faith, one might assume that a majority of Christians profess that God does certain things, and in order for God to do these things, God must act.

Second, some claim that the concept of divine action is essential to certain Christian beliefs.<sup>4</sup> That is, sense cannot be made of some Christian beliefs without the concept of divine action. For example, understanding the Christian doctrine of the incarnation seems to depend on the concept of divine action. The notion of the incarnation would not make sense if God did not act. Again, consider some of the ecumenical creeds of the Christian faith. The Apostles' Creed states that Christ "was conceived by the Holy Spirit," the Nicene Creed states that Christ "came down from heaven," "became incarnate," and "was made human," and the Athanasian Creed states that God "took" humanity to himself. If the notion that God acts is removed from the incarnation, then making sense of the incarnation would prove difficult if not impossible. Thus, there seems to be some basis for thinking that the concept of divine action is essential to some Christian beliefs.

Third, according to some statements of the Christian faith, the concept of divine action is important to Christian practice. At least for Reformed Christians, the structure of the Heidelberg Catechism indicates that the concept of divine action is important for Christian practice. There are three main parts to the catechism: (1) we are guilty, (2) God delivered us, and (3) we live obedient lives of gratitude. The implication is that because we have been delivered by God from our guilty state, we are now obligated to live holy lives. In addition, Luther's Small Catechism (1529) assumes a relation between God's

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Nicholas Saunders, *Divine Action and Modern Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3; Christoph Schwöbel, *God: Action and Revelation* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1992), 23-24. Also, cf. Christoph Schwöbel, "Divine Agency and Providence," *Modern Theology* 3, no. 3 (1987): 225-244.

activity and Christian practice. Luther's Small Catechism claims that God will either "punish all who transgress" against God's commandments or that God "promises grace and every blessing to all who keep them" (Part I, Conclusion). The relation here is one of blessing or judgment. The implication is that, at least for some Christians, there is a genuine connection between God's activity and Christian practice.

The Bible also supposes a connection between God's activity and Christian practice. For example, the notion of the incarnation, the idea that the second person of the Trinity emptied himself and assumed human nature, is also the ground by which Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, encourages his readers to be like Christ. Paul exhorts his readers by writing the following: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:5, NRSV). This exhortation is followed by Paul's statement of the incarnation, and following this statement, he writes, "Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12-13, NRSV). Again, the idea here is that there is some kind of connection between God's activity and Christian practice.

There are other examples of the connection between God's activity and Christian practice in the Bible. In Exodus 20, God speaks the Ten Commandments. However, before they are given, verse 2 reads, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (NRSV). The implication is that because

God delivered Israel, they ought to keep the commandments. The formula in Joshua 24 is the same. This passage records the activity of God from the time of Abraham up to when God delivered the land of Canaan into the hands of the Israelites. And in verse 14, the passage reads, "Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:14, NRSV). Again, the implication is that because of God's redemptive activity, the people of God ought to serve God alone. Thus, the Bible seems to indicate that God is worthy of worship not simply because of God's nature but also because of what God has done.

Fourth, the concept of divine action is important because the Bible supposes that God does certain things. For example, the gospels portray the second person of the Trinity as active in Palestine. Jesus Christ, among other things, called Peter (Matthew 4:19), healed many (Luke 4:40), rebuked the wind (Luke 8:24), preached the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), appeared to his disciples (John 20:19), and ascended into heaven (Acts 1:9).

In fact, the Bible is full of references to God's activity. The notion that God does certain things is implied in Genesis when God created the earth (Genesis 1:1-31), in Exodus when God appeared to Moses in a flame of fire out of a bush (Exodus 3:2), and in Joshua when God threw the Amorites into a panic (Joshua 10:10). And many Christians anticipate that God will continue to be active in the world based claims of the Bible. God continues to call people to be his children (Romans 9) and to be part of the kingdom of



God (Acts 1:6-8), and the Bible claims that Jesus Christ will come again (1 Thessalonians 4 and 5) and that God will renew the heavens and the earth (Revelation 21). Thus, the biblical material certainly makes the claim that God is active and will continue to be active in the world.

If the notion of divine action is removed from the Bible, then making sense of biblical claims would prove difficult. For example, just how should one understand the book of Revelation if God does not act in the world? Revelation claims that God gave a special revelation to John. Revelation 1:1-2 reads, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw." It is in the realm of logical possibility that John was wrong about his vision or that he was simply crazy. Nevertheless, the passage intends to communicate that John did in fact receive this revelation from God. At face value, then, Revelation is filled with descriptions of God revealing visions to John, and these visions are filled with notions of God's present and future activity.

Psalm 74 also describes multiple actions of God. Psalm 74:12-23 reads,

Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the earth. You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness. You cut openings for springs and torrents; you dried up ever-flowing streams. Yours is the day, yours also the night; you established the luminaries and the sun. You have fixed all the bounds of the earth; you made summer and winter. Remember this, O Lord, how the enemy scoffs, and an impious people reviles your name. Do not deliver the soul of your dove to the wild animals; do not forget the life of your poor forever. Have regard for your covenant, for the dark

places of the land are full of the haunts of violence. Do not let the downtrodden be put to shame; let the poor and needy praise your name. Rise up, O God, plead your cause; remember how the impious scoff at you all day long. Do not forget the clamor of your foes, the uproar of your adversaries that goes up continually.<sup>5</sup>

In this Psalm, God's activity is rehearsed, but God's activity is also hoped for. And so, Scripture not only tells of God's past and present activity, it also *hopes* that God will continue to do certain things. And, again, in order for God to do these things, God must act.

The claim being made so far is that the notion of divine action is an important topic to be discussed. Obviously, the claim that God's activity is important to Christian belief and practice, and that it is vital to making sense of biblical claims is not the claim that it is or must be true. Basically, divine action is important to many basic Christian beliefs and practices, and scripture would lead one to assume that, according to the Bible anyway, God *is* active in the world. That is, the assumption is that God does certain things. And order to do those things, God must act. Thus, the fact that some believe in the claim that God is active in the world should come as no surprise; it should be expected.

A recent poll supports the fact that many believe in God's activity.<sup>6</sup> The Harris Poll indicates that 70% of all adults surveyed believe in the resurrection of Christ and

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<sup>5</sup> Psalm 74:12-23 (NRSV).

<sup>6</sup> *The Harris Poll*, "What People Do and Do Not Believe In," December 15, 2009 ([http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris\\_poll/pubs/Harris\\_Poll\\_2009\\_12\\_15.pdf](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/pubs/Harris_Poll_2009_12_15.pdf)). Admittedly, this survey does not directly indicate belief about God's activity in the world. However, it could easily be inferred that if one believes that God does certain things that one would also have to believe that God acts.

76% believe in miracles. The poll also indicates that 61% of Americans believe in the virgin birth. And 97% of Christians surveyed believe in the resurrection of Christ. At any rate, the survey indicates that high percentages of the American public not only believe in God but also believe that God is active in the world.

Thus, the fact that divine action appears to be an important concept for Christian belief and practice, the fact that a straightforward reading of the Bible seems to indicate that God is active in the world, and that a good many of Christians and even some non-Christians seem to believe that God is active indicates that divine action is an important topic for Christian theology.

And possibly because of its fundamental character, divine action is not a new topic in Christian thought. Pre-modern Christian scholars, such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin, discuss the nature of God's activity in one degree or another. As Maurice Wiles writes, "It is what God does as creator and redeemer that has always been seen as crucial both for Christian faith and for Christian theology."<sup>7</sup> The implication is that an inactive God might as well be a dead God and thus irrelevant to Christian belief and practice. Thus, theology needs to seriously reflect on the nature of God's activity.

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<sup>7</sup> Maurice Wiles, *God's Action in the World* (London: SCM Press, 1986).

#### 4. Views on the Concept of Divine Action

Many would agree that the notion of divine action is an important topic to be discussed, but there are a variety of views on how best to understand the notion.<sup>8</sup> This brief survey illustrates that scholars differ on the nature of God's activity and that some differ on how best to discuss the concept. Consider the following as illustrative of these differences.

Some attempt to make sense of divine action with analogies. For example, Peter Geach examines God's activity in relation to human activity by comparing the relation to a chess game.<sup>9</sup> He writes,

God and man alike play in the great game. But God is the supreme Grand Master who has everything under his control. Some of the players are consciously helping his plan, others are trying to hinder it; whatever the finite players do, God's plan will be executed; though various lines of God's play will answer to various moves of the finite players.<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, Maurice Wiles prefers to see the relation between divine and human action in a looser sense. He compares divine and human action to that of a theater. He writes, "...the actors are each given the basic character of the person he or she is to represent and the general setting in which their interaction is to be worked out but in which they are left

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<sup>8</sup> Views of divine action will be explored in more detail in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> Geach, *Providence and Evil*, 58.

free to determine experimentally how the drama is to develop.”<sup>11</sup> The author of the drama, that is, God, is understood to be the author of the whole, but perhaps not of the particular incidents, which instead are made up by the actors. Thus, using analogies to think through the nature of God’s activity can provide conceptual imagery, but this method also lacks conceptual precision.

Some attempt to explain the means or manner of God’s activity in the world. For example, when examining the government of God, Thomas Aquinas writes, “With respect to government two elements are to be taken into account: the plan for governing, i.e., providence, and the carrying out of this plan. As to the first, God governs all things immediately; as to the second, he governs some things through the mediation of others.”<sup>12</sup> For Thomas, sometimes God acts through secondary causes in order to bring his plan about, and sometimes God is the primary agent.

In the tradition of Aquinas, Austin Farrer suggests that a ‘double agency’ theory adequately explains how it could be that God acts in the world.<sup>13</sup> His double agency theory employs a language similar to that of Aquinas’ view. Essentially, this view claims that both God (i.e., the primary cause) and the human agent (i.e., the secondary cause) are fully active in all events. Both causes (i.e., divine and human) simultaneously bring

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<sup>11</sup> Wiles, *God’s Action in the World*, 37-38.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia. 103, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Austin Farrer, *Reflective Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Charles C. Conti (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), and *Faith and Speculation* (New York: New York University Press, 1967). For a complete discussion on this issue, consult chapter 2 of this dissertation.

about the same state of affairs.<sup>14</sup> Because both the divine and human agents are active in the event, God maintains his providential control of events and humanity maintains their autonomy and freedom in bringing events about.

However, some argue that the primary/secondary cause or double agency theory of divine action is incoherent. For example, Charles Wood argues that the idea of double agency—the idea that two distinct agents perform the same action simultaneously and the result is one effect—is incoherent.<sup>15</sup> Being dissatisfied with the double agency theory, some scholars like Philip Clayton, John Cobb Jr., David Griffin and Schubert Ogden have suggested that God’s relation to the world be seen as one of process and divine action as one of persuasion.<sup>16</sup> Thus, discussing the means or manner of divine action helps to clarify one particular aspect of God’s activity in the world.

Thomas Tracy’s view of divine action takes into account God’s purpose for acting, that is, that God desires to having a loving relationship with his creation. Thus, his view

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<sup>14</sup> Owen C. Thomas, *Introduction to Theology* (Wilton, Connecticut: Morehouse-Barelow Co., Inc., 1983), 113.

<sup>15</sup> Charles M. Wood, “How Does God Act?” *International Journal for Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, no. 2 (July 1999): 148. Also, cf. his *The Question of Providence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Philip Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress, Press, 2008); David R. Griffin, “Revelation, Divine Causation, and Biblical Theology,” *Encounter* 36 (1975): 342-360, *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976; reprint, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991); Schubert M. Ogden, “What Sense Does it Make to Say, ‘God Acts in History?’” and John B. Cobb, Jr., “Natural Causality and Divine Action,” in *God’s Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem*, ed. Owen C. Thomas (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983); Cobb, “God and the Scientific Worldview,” in *Talking About God: Doing Theology in the Context of Modern Pluralism*, eds. David Tracy and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1983).

of divine action claims to be a middle ground between the classic and process view.<sup>17</sup> According to Tracy, this view maintains that God is independent from and Lord of creation, which is contrary to the process view. However, this view also maintains that God enters into a loving and mutual relation with his creation, which is a main tenet in the process view. Thus, it seems that one's view of the purpose of divine action also influences one's theory of divine action. Still, the purpose of divine action merely makes sense of one aspect of the concept.

One could also discuss divine action according to degree and extent. Terrance Tiessen examines various views of divine action using this approach.<sup>18</sup> His account ranges from views that see minimal degrees of divine action in the world (e.g., Deism) to maximal degrees of divine action in the world (e.g., Fatalism). The result is eleven different models of providence and divine action. Tiessen's study is not intended to be exhaustive, but his account is helpful because it demonstrates that there are, in fact, a variety of theories on divine action, and one way to think about the differences is by the extent and degree of God's activity.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Tracy, *God, Action, and Embodiment* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984). Also see Tracy's "Theologies of Divine Action," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, eds. Philip Clayton and Zachary R. Simpson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): 596-611.

<sup>18</sup> Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> For a variety of models of divine action, also cf. Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1990), 243-270; Owen C. Thomas, *God's Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem*, ed. Owen C. Thomas (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 231-240.

## 5. The Problem of Divine Action

That there is a variety of views on divine action begs the question, “Why are there various views on divine action?” If divine action is an important notion for Christian doctrine, faith and practice, then why are there so many models of God’s activity in the world? These are complicated questions, and more time will be spent on this issue in the next chapter. For now, the basic problem is introduced.

Ian Barbour suggests that many recent models of divine action are the result of attempts to modify the traditional notion of God’s activity. According to Barbour the traditional model of God’s activity has to do with a view of God as primarily omnipotent, omniscient, unchanging, and sovereign.<sup>20</sup> God absolutely governs and rules the world; everything is subordinate to God, and everything that comes about comes about according to God’s pre-ordained plan. Of this view, he writes, “God affects the world, but the world does not affect a God who is eternal, unchanging, and impassible.”<sup>21</sup>

Barbour’s contention is that the traditional model of God’s activity has problems, and so scholars are prompted to modify or reject the view.<sup>22</sup> According to Barbour, the problems are as follows: (1) the problem of reconciling human freedom with God’s activity, (2) the problem of evil, (3) the problem of understanding the status of language

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<sup>20</sup> Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, 244.

<sup>21</sup> Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, 245.

<sup>22</sup> See also Brenda de Wet, “Particular Divine Action: A Challenge to Intellectual Integrity in a Post Christian Age,” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27, no 2. (2008).



about a God who acts, (4) the problem of reconciling competing religious truth claims regarding God's activity, (5) the problem of reconciling evolution and God's creative activity, and (6) the problem of understanding divine action in the context of other scientific claims.<sup>23</sup> Barbour argues that, for the traditional view, these problems are insurmountable, and, thus, scholars reject the traditional notion of divine action and offer alternative models.

In addition, Langdon Gilkey argues that theological discourse is absent from these alternative models. He claims that theological discourse is absent from discourse on divine action because of the problem of evil, human freedom, and modern empirical science.<sup>24</sup> That is, theologians are uncomfortable discussing the concept of divine action because of problems usually associated with it. Perhaps for this reason, Paul Gwynne laments, "[the concept of divine action] does not enjoy a prominent place in theological discussion and is often only treated summarily in theological works."<sup>25</sup> However, Gwynne admits that despite the absence of theological discourse about divine action, his dissertation examines a large body of literature. As will be pointed out in chapter two,

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<sup>23</sup> Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, 246-247. Barbour actually identifies the third category as "patriarchy." That is, one of the problems associated with the concept of divine action is the constant reference to God in male terms. However, I have broadened the problem to include other issues in religious language besides our gender references to God. Chapter 2 will have more to say on this issue.

<sup>24</sup> Langdon B. Gilkey, "The Concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 43 (July 1963): 171-192. Also see Gilkey's "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *The Journal of Religion* 41 (July 1961): 194-205. These problems will be explored further in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

<sup>25</sup> Gwynne, *Special Divine Action*, 15.

much of this literature merely attempts to address problems usually associated with the concept of divine action without addressing relevant theological data.

The absence of theological discourse from divine action is interesting and maddening because what God does seems to give rise to theological investigation. It might be interesting to see if theology can help make sense of the concept of divine action. If what God does gives rise to the concept of divine action, then it makes sense that examining claims about what God does can help make sense of the concept. Furthermore, it seems that making proper sense of the concept of divine action is incomplete without careful and serious theological investigation. In fact, by examining claims about who God is in addition to what God does can also help make sense of the concept of divine action.

## **6. Scope and Method of Project**

Arguably, the contemporary debate on divine action seems to have begun with Bultmann's demythologizing project in the 1940s and 1950s. Bultmann's claim is essentially that the modern mind has been influenced by modern science and technology to such an extent that the miraculous claims made in scripture either must be false or else need to be re-interpreted. In the decades following Bultmann, scholars have wrestled with the problematic nature of the concept of divine action. And in addition to modern scientific claims that pose problems for the concept of divine action, Gwynne argues that other key issues include the nature of the language about a God who acts, the relation

between divine and human action, and the nature of the divine agent. Gwynne's dissertation examines much of this literature from 1965-1995.<sup>26</sup> Thus, a different approach will be taken in this dissertation.

Given that the idea of divine action touches on almost every topic in theology, it is necessary to limit the scope of this project even though this dissertation takes seriously the charge from Gwynne, Gilkey, and others that theological investigation is absent from discourse on divine action.<sup>27</sup> Thus, this dissertation will limit its scope to one theologian, namely, Emil Brunner, and measure his contribution to discourse on divine action. In short, this dissertation investigates specific theological claims of Brunner about what God does and what God is like and the value of these claims for making sense of the concept of divine action.

Brunner's theological system was written in the 1950s and 1960s when the concept of divine action was beginning to face problems because of modern scientific claims. Perhaps because of this theological climate, Brunner addressed issues associated with the notion of divine action in his three volumes of dogmatic theology. Thus,

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<sup>26</sup> Gwynne's dissertation notes that Gilkey's essay, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," marked the beginning of contemporary discourse on divine action. Langdon B. Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *Journal of Religion* 41 (1961): 194-205.

<sup>27</sup> For example, consider Thomas F. Tracy, "Evil, Human Freedom, and Divine Grace," in *Human and Divine Agency*, eds. F. Michael McLain and W. Mark Richardson (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1999), 165-190 and Patrick Miller, "Revisiting the God Who Acts," *Theology Today* 54 (April 1997): 1-5.

Brunner's theology is likely relevant and finds itself in the context of the current debate on divine action even though nobody has considered Brunner's contribution.<sup>28</sup>

## 7. Thesis

It is the purpose of this dissertation to explore the concept of divine action that is implicit in Brunner's theology and put theological investigation back into discourse on divine action. The thesis of this dissertation is as follows. By examining Brunner's claims about what God does and who God is, sense can be made of the notion that God created and sustains the universe, governs it according to his plan, and intervenes in its history. Considering Brunner's claims about who God is and what God does obtains insights into the effect, content, purpose, extent, and degree of God's activity in the world. Thus, when considering who God is and what God does, the concept of divine action secures new insights and perspectives that have otherwise been recently ignored. The result of these new insights and perspectives is a view of God's activity that is able to overcome some common objections and problems.

The implication of the thesis, if true, is that when scholars reflect on the concept of divine action, their reflection needs to take the wider framework of theological

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<sup>28</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. Olive Wyon, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950), *This Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, trans. Olive Wyon, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1952), *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith and the Consummation*, trans. David Cairns in collaboration with T. H. L. Parker, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962).

discourse into consideration. Without this consideration, the concept of divine action is missing crucial and applicable data and is also exposed to various challenges.

Thus, when the concept of divine action includes reflection on what God does in creation and redemption, on a wide range of divine attributes, on God's purpose and intention in creating humanity, and on God's relation to the world, then problems usually associated with the concept of divine action are more easily dealt with and new insights are obtained. Obviously, this claim does not rule out that there are, in fact, philosophical, scientific, and biblical issues that the concept of divine action still needs to overcome. However, these issues should not give Christians a compelling reason to balk at the concept of a God who acts.

## **8. Outline of Project**

This section briefly outlines the chapters and claims of the dissertation.

After this brief introductory chapter, chapter 2 argues that contemporary discussions inadequately consider what God does and what God is like as possible resources for making sense of problems associated with the concept of God's activity. This chapter also suggests that an adequate model of divine action must address the means, manner, effect, purpose, extent, and degree of God's activity in the world. This chapter then speculates that investigating the nature and work of God could prove useful for constructing a model of divine action.

Chapter 3 briefly introduces scholarship on Brunner and then examines and analyzes his thought on the nature of God. This chapter argues that Brunner's discussion on the self-communication of God such as God's name, love, lordship and holiness helps make sense of God's activity by illuminating the manner, effect, purpose, and intention of God's activity.

Chapter 4 shows that Brunner's thought on God's work in creation, providence, and redemption illuminates the relation between divine and human action. Brunner's thought helps clarify our understanding of the extent and degree of God's activity in relation to human activity as we examine his claims about God's purpose in creation and God's work in redemption.

Chapter 5 considers a particular problem for making sense of divine action, namely, that scientific claims are problematic for understanding God's activity. Some argue that the problems posed by modern science are insurmountable, and thus the concept of divine action needs modification. This chapter argues that considering Brunner's thought on God's creative work can help make sense of the notion that God acts with and without natural processes. As a result of God's creative work and lordship over creation, natural processes do not preclude particular acts of God including special or extraordinary activities such as miracles and redemptive acts. Nor do natural processes preclude God from acting through the ordinary workings of nature.

Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation by considering the claims made in previous chapters and suggesting that any attempt to make sense of divine action without

considering who God is and what God does is fundamentally incomplete. The chapter concludes by drafting a rudimentary model of divine action that takes these issues into consideration.

## **9. Conclusion**

To reiterate, the concept of divine action is an essential topic for Christian theology. However, it's not just a topic. The concept of divine action is an essential part of the framework of Christian belief, practice, and thought. Because the concept of divine action plays such an essential role, discussing the topic becomes urgent when faced with genuine challenges. According to some, the concept of divine action is problematic. It is no wonder, then, that the topic itself has enjoyed much attention recently, and much of the discussion has been fruitful. This dissertation contributes to the contemporary debate by examining certain theological claims as they relate to God's activity in the world. The result will be a working model of divine action that takes theological claims seriously and that also attempts to deal with some of the key issues in the debate.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE OF DIVINE ACTION

#### 1. Introduction

As pointed out in chapter 1, the topic of divine action has enjoyed much attention. This attention is for good reason. The notion of God's activity in the world is an important concept for Christian belief and practice, and the Bible describes and supposes that God does certain things. However, understanding the notion of divine action faces a variety of problems ranging from the problem of evil, the problem of understanding the status of language about God's activity, the problem of reconciling divine and human action, and the problem of reconciling natural events with God's activity. Much of the recent scholarship on divine action responds to these problems. The trends in the scholarship consider talk about the language of divine action, the nature of the divine agent, the relation between divine and human action, and the relation between divine action and the natural world. This chapter examines these trends.

Chapter 2 argues that contemporary discussions inadequately consider what God does and what God is like as possible resources for making sense of problems associated with the concept of God's activity. This chapter also suggests that a model of divine action must address the means, manner, effect, purpose, extent, and degree of God's



activity. This chapter then speculates that investigating the nature and work of God could prove useful for constructing a model of divine action. Thus, this chapter begins to contemplate the idea that a theological framework may provide essential components to the concept of divine action. The upshot is that if examining what God is like and what God does is relevant, then the recent attempts to make sense of God's activity in the world are missing important components.

This chapter will pursue the following strategy. The next section introduces the recent history of dialogue on divine action and identifies the key issues. Then the chapter analyzes and evaluates the current discussion. Next, this chapter introduces the concept of a model and the main assumptions within which models of divine action will be discussed. The next section presents and evaluates an approach that examines models of divine action. Finally, this chapter concludes by suggesting what sort of work could be done to supplement the current discussion of the concept of divine action.

## 2. The Contemporary Landscape of Scholarship on Divine Action

In 1963, Langdon Gilkey wrote that in his generation, “[p]rovidence is notable mainly in its absence from theological discussion.”<sup>1</sup> Gilkey believed that the problem of evil, Arminianism, and the rise of modern empirical science were among some of the

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<sup>1</sup> Langdon B. Gilkey, “The Concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology,” *The Journal of Religion* 43 (July 1963): 171-192. Also see Gilkey’s “Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language,” *The Journal of Religion* 41 (July 1961): 194-205. It should be stated that while ‘providence’ and ‘divine action’ are not exactly the same concept, talking about providence entails talking about divine action.

reasons for the discussion's demise. As a result, he suggested that scholars *have* views of providence, but because of some problems associated with providence those scholars found it difficult to *articulate* those views.

However, there has been a recent explosion of literature on the topic of providence, which is a component of divine action, and some scholars link this eruption to Gilkey's challenge.<sup>2</sup> In decades following Gilkey's assessment, divine action has been of great interest to Christian philosophers (e.g., Thomas Flint, William Alston, Eleonore Stump, J. R. Lucas and Peter Geach),<sup>3</sup> theologians and biblical scholars (e.g., Langdon Gilkey, G. Ernest Wright and Terence E. Fretheim),<sup>4</sup> and theologically oriented scientists or scientifically oriented theologians (e.g., John Polkinghorne, Robert J. Russell and Nancey Murphy).<sup>5</sup> Ironically, some of the results from this renewed interest are trends that deal with the problem of evil, creaturely freedom and autonomy, and the challenge of

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Gwynne is an example of a scholar that sees this link. See his *Special Divine Action: Key Issues in the Contemporary Debate* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. William P. Alston, "Divine Action: Shadow or Substance?" in *The God Who Acts*, ed. Thomas F. Tracy (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Eleonore Stump, "Petitionary Prayer," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (1979): 81-91, and "Being and Goodness," in *Divine and Human Action*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); Peter Geach, *Providence and Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); J. R. Lucas, *Freedom and Grace* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976).

<sup>4</sup> Langdon B. Gilkey, "Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language," *The Journal of Religion* 41 (July 1961): 194-205; G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital* (London: SCM, 1952); Terence E. Fretheim, "The God Who Acts: An Old Testament Perspective," *Theology Today* 54 (April 1997): 6-18.

<sup>5</sup> John Polkinghorne, "The Laws of Nature and the Laws of Physics,"; Nancey Murphy, "Evidence of Design in the Fine-Tuning of the Universe"; R. J. Russell, "Finite Creation without a Beginning: The Doctrine of Creation in Relation to Big Bang and Quantum Cosmologies," in *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, eds. Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy and C. J. Isham (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1999).

modern science. That is, these problems, according to Gilkey, were previously problematic to discussions on divine action but lately have opened the door to additional dialogue.

This new dialogue on divine action has, for the most part, been well documented elsewhere.<sup>6</sup> As a result, this chapter will not simply repeat previous analysis, but it will accentuate certain themes in order to provide the reader with a general impression of the nature of the discussion and to provide a context for the debate on divine action.

The recent dialogue has addressed four main issues: (1) the status of our language about a God who acts; (2) the nature of the divine agent; (3) the relation between divine and human action; and (4) the relation between the divine agent and the natural order. These four issues will each be examined in turn.

### 2.1. Issues of Language

Issues of language play a large role in scholarship on divine action.<sup>7</sup> In his dissertation on special divine action, Paul Gwynne identifies three main issues with regard to language: (1) the locality of divine action, (2) the language of causation, and (3)

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Gwynne's dissertation *Special Divine Action*; Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002); Thomas, *Introduction to Theology*, 112-115 and Owen C. Thomas, "Summary Analysis," *God's Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem*, ed. Owen C. Thomas (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983), 231-234.

<sup>7</sup> For example, see Gordon Kaufman, "On the Meaning of 'Act of God,'" *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968): 175-201; Christoph Schwöbel, *God: Action and Revelation* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1992); and Mats J. Hansson, *Understanding an Act of God: An Essay in Philosophical Theology* (Uppsala: Doctoral dissertation at Uppsala University, 1991).

the language of intention. This section examines each of these in turn and then offers a brief analysis.

According to Gwynne, one of the main issues involved in talking about special divine action has to do with the location of God's activity. The issue is caused by an empirical difficulty to verify acts of God. Can God's activity be identified in history? If God does act in history, being able to identify specific occasions in which God acts proves difficult. Thus, perhaps there should be restrictions on language about the location of divine action. If God's activity cannot be identified in history, then perhaps talk of divine action should be restricted to a-historical and subjective claims.<sup>8</sup>

Gwynne maintains that a contemporary inclination is to restrict language of divine action to subjective and mental areas.<sup>9</sup> He sees three reasons for this restriction. First, he notices a trend to emphasize divine *revelation* at the expense of divine *action*. Second, he argues that there is a tendency to deny the historicity of biblical descriptions of divine action. Third, there is a trend in the scholarship which denies that God answers petitionary prayer.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the status of talk about divine action, based on these trends, becomes existential, subjective, and even metaphorical.

For Gwynne, restricting talk about divine action to either subjective or objective claims creates an unnecessary dualism. That is, the choice between making existential

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<sup>8</sup> Gwynne, *Special Divine Action*, 113.

<sup>9</sup> Gwynne, *Special Divine Action*, 113.

<sup>10</sup> Gwynne, *Special Divine Action*, 113.

and mental claims as opposed to objective and physical claims about God's activity sets up false alternatives. He argues that perhaps both are legitimate ways in which to think about our language pertaining to divine action.<sup>11</sup>

Second, Gwynne's attention turns to the philosophy of action, and he examines a more traditional approach for talking about God's special activity: the language of causation. Gwynne writes,

There are several notable advantages of this approach to SDA: it provides a solid ontological basis for SDA talk; it grants special status to miracles which enables them to function in their traditional apologetic role; it also enables theologians to talk about special acts of providence which presumably constitute the majority of instances of SDA.<sup>12</sup>

However, according to some scholars, this way of talking about special divine action is problematic. Using the language of causation assumes that we can identify and distinguish supernatural and natural causes of particular events. Because of the difficulty associated with distinguishing and identifying supernatural and natural causes, the interpretation and identification of special divine action seems to be open to subjective bias. Gwynne acknowledges the epistemological difficulty in identifying particular acts of God, but this obviously does not count against God actually causing a particular state

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<sup>11</sup> Gwynne, *Special Divine Action*, 113.

<sup>12</sup> Gwynne, *Special Divine Action*, 114.

of affairs to be brought about. However, it does raise some important issues in talking about God's special activity.<sup>13</sup>

Third, because of the problems with causal language, scholars prefer to talk about special divine action using the language of intention. Gwynne writes,

The chief advantages of speaking of SDA in terms of intentional language come from the fact that such events are always signs of some sort, and that this type of language offers a way around the impasse which troubles the causal approach.<sup>14</sup>

The language of intention removes the necessity of locating the exact cause of an event and instead looks for the intention of the event. The disadvantage, argues Gwynne, lies in the fact that a prior faith perspective is needed in order to distinguish between a mundane event and a supernatural event. That is, a prior faith commitment may enable one to distinguish a mundane event from a supernatural event. Thus, for those who have a prior faith commitment, the epistemological difficulty is removed. The disadvantage lies in the notion that for those who do not have a prior faith commitment, the epistemological difficulty is not removed.<sup>15</sup>

Gwynne argues that the issues of language about special divine action are more symptomatic of prior scientific and theological commitments. That is, most of the problems can be grouped into two main areas: (1) modern scientific progress, and (2)

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<sup>13</sup> Gwynne, *Special Divine Action*, 114.

<sup>14</sup> Gwynne, *Special Divine Action*, 115.

<sup>15</sup> Gwynne, *Special Divine Action*, 115.

attributes within God himself. Thus, perhaps these issues of language are clues to more fundamental differences.<sup>16</sup>

Michael Horton makes a similar assessment and asserts that there are prior philosophical and linguistic commitments that influence views of talking about divine action. He claims that if one's tendency were to interpret the Bible in symbolic and metaphorical terms, then one would likely understand predications of divine action metaphorically and symbolically.<sup>17</sup> Horton also argues that more cognitive/propositional types of theology tend to understand predications of divine action literally because this type tends to see the Bible in a more literal fashion. Horton then states a typology of understanding predications of divine action based on linguistic commitments. He writes,

[T]he predication of divine action in history is understood in one of the following ways: (1) as the mythological, symbolic, or metaphorical manner of speaking that conceals a revelatory encounter; (2) as the community's interpretation of a natural occurrence; (3) as a reference to the narrative itself rather than to extratextual "realities"; (4) as the ordinary effect of divine embodiment in the world in which all events are simultaneously the products of divine agency and human agency; (5) as the extraordinary effect of divine volition in which God acts either directly or indirectly within the causal structure of human existence.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Gwynne, *Special Divine Action*, 115.

<sup>17</sup> Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 55.

<sup>18</sup> Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 54. Interestingly, Horton's typology resembles theological typologies that have been presented by scholars Lindbeck and Tracy. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984); David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Horton's message is clear: prior theological, scientific and philosophical commitments play a large role in how one understands predications of divine action.

Let me conclude this section by stating that the role of language in talking about divine action (and special divine action in particular) is an interesting and important issue. If biblical truth claims do not ground confessional approach to theological language, then statements about God's activity in the world will remain empty. Suffice it to say that scholars such as Alston, Horton, and Gwynne have done an adequate job in defending the claim that despite some inherent problems associated with talking about God's activity in the world, our language regarding divine action can be meaningful and literal.

## 2.2. The Nature of the Divine Agent

Scholars also discuss the nature of the divine agent and how God's nature affects our understanding of God's activity. After evaluating this scholarship, Gwynne concludes that most scholars think that God's ordinary activity (e.g., providence) is less problematic than God's extraordinary activity (e.g., miracles and redemption) in the context of God's nature.<sup>19</sup> That is, the concept of special divine action is problematic given certain characteristics in God's nature. As a result of these obstacles, some reject the notion of special divine action for the sake of God's attributes.<sup>20</sup> Gwynne has

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<sup>19</sup> Gwynne, *Special Divine Action*, 229-307.

<sup>20</sup> Maurice Wiles, "Divine Action: Some Moral Considerations," in *The God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations*, ed. Thomas F. Tracy (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).



identified the key divine characteristics as the following: (1) the transcendence of God, (2) the immanence of God, (3) God's faithfulness to creation's autonomy, and (4) God's moral character. The rest of this section briefly considers each characteristic in turn.

First, the transcendence of God raises concerns because, to some, if God is transcendent and creation is finite, divine activity within finite creation is incoherent, especially the notion of special divine action. For example, Maurice Wiles suggests that the notion of God's ordinary activity still makes sense if God is transcendent, but God's special activity, the notion that God intervenes in the course of history, does not make sense if God is transcendent.<sup>21</sup> How can a transcendent, immaterial, infinite, and wholly other being, that is, God, stoop down and intervene in a finite, physical, and sinful universe? Thus, divine transcendence raises some obstacles for understanding God's involvement in creation. Because of these obstacles, Wiles rejects the notion of special divine action.

Second, Gwynne argues that the idea of a personal divine agent's involvement in creation aids the concept of special divine action. Gwynne seems to think that the concept of divine immanence rescues the concept of God's activity from problematic issues in divine transcendence. He writes,

Whilst conceding that there is a real difference between the divine and human persons, the fact that there is an analogy between the two also points to an element of similarity, especially the need for particular actions if the agent, either human or divine, is to be genuinely called <<personal>>.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Maurice Wiles, *God's Action in the World* (London: SCM, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> Gwynne, *Special Divine Action*, 312. Emphasis (i.e., <<>>) is Gwynne's.

Gwynne observes that analogies of God's general providence are impersonal in nature and analogies of God's special activity (e.g., miracles, particular acts of providence) are personal. From the standpoint of God's personal involvement in creation, special divine action is plausible, and according to Gwynne, expected. So, according to Gwynne, what we need is a balance between divine transcendence and immanence. This issue seems to echo the conclusion of both Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson who have argued that the relationship between divine transcendence and immanence is the dominant issue in 20<sup>th</sup>-century theology.<sup>23</sup>

Third, scholars wrestle with the extent to which God controls creation. If God extends his control over creation too much, then it seems as if God is not being faithful to creation's autonomy.<sup>24</sup> The assumption here is that God has given the cosmos a degree of autonomy that would be incompatible with the notion that God acts in special ways within the cosmos. This obstacle extends not only into the natural processes of nature but also the activity of human agents. More will be said about natural processes and human action later on in this chapter.

Fourth, some suggest that God's activity in creation is inconsistent with God's moral goodness. For example, Wiles argues that there are moral reasons as to why one

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<sup>23</sup> Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20<sup>th</sup>-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

<sup>24</sup> See for example Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger and George V. Coyne, eds., *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding* (Vatican State City: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1988).

ought not to think that God acts in special ways. The argument goes something like the following. If God were to intervene in a particular state of affairs in order to prevent some evil from being brought about, then God would be morally obligated to intervene in every state of affairs where some evil were about to occur. If God only intervened in some instances where evil were about to occur, then it's hard to make sense of God's moral goodness.<sup>25</sup> So one way to respond to this challenge (a method that Wiles has adopted) is to deny that God intervenes in the cosmos. The problem of evil, then, looms large here.<sup>26</sup>

### 2.3. Divine and Human Action

Scholars also think about the concept of divine action through the relation between divine and human action. The renewed interest in divine and human agency is partly due to trends in agency theory and partly due to the emergence and influence of process and open theism. As a result, Christian philosophers and theologians have had the opportunity to provide alternate slants to this issue.<sup>27</sup>

For some scholars, the relation between divine and human action seems to indicate that divine concurrence is the main issue. For example, David Basinger argues

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<sup>25</sup> Wiles, "Divine Action: Some Moral Considerations," 13-29.

<sup>26</sup> For this connection, see Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

<sup>27</sup> For example, see Hugh McCann, "Divine Power and Action," in *The Blackwell Guide to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William Mann (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994); Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994); Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

that the issue has to do with what is logically possible for God to bring about. He writes, “*Are there limitations on God’s ability to unilaterally control voluntary human decision-making (and thus voluntary action)?*”<sup>28</sup> This is an important question that needs to be addressed because part of unpacking the relation between divine and human action involves understanding the degree to which God controls human action.

However, the issue of the relation between divine and human action could extend beyond divine concurrence. Does God relate more broadly to the world? Does God respond to his creation? Does God limit his involvement in earthly affairs? Is God’s will sovereign over his creatures’ will? Does God give dominion to humanity and the church? What is God’s purpose in creating humanity? What are the affects of the fall (if any) on the relation between divine and human action? Thus, scholars who discuss the relation between divine and human action sometimes find themselves discussing it within the context of the language of causation and intention, divine omnipotence, divine sovereignty and human freedom, the compatibility or incompatibility of divine foreknowledge with human freedom, and prayer.<sup>29</sup>

In many respects, though, the literature has focused not on these broader issues but on what God is logically capable of bringing about and on the nature of human

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<sup>28</sup> David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 25.

<sup>29</sup> E.g., Thomas V. Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988); David Basinger and Randall Basinger, eds., *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986); Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

voluntary action.<sup>30</sup> Thus, one's view of divine omnipotence and human agency impacts how one understands the relation between divine and human action. One's view also supposedly impacts how one thinks of other doctrines. For example, Thomas Flint outlines the implications of his Molinist account of divine and human action for subjects such as prayer, prophecy, and the incarnation.<sup>31</sup>

#### 2.4. Divine Action and the Natural Order

Another key issue concerns the relation between God's activity and events in the natural order. Does God only exercise his providential care over human affairs, or also exercise providence over nature? The natural world contains events that need to be evaluated within the context of God's activity.

The literature ranges from discussions on the relation between the explanatory weight of methodological naturalism and evidence of intelligent design to discussions on the exact nature of God's dealings with natural events.<sup>32</sup> As one might guess, a large part

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<sup>30</sup> For more on this discussion, cf. Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; revised edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> Flint, *Divine Providence*, 197-250. For the impact of molinism on one's view of the incarnation, cf. Flint, "The Possibilities of Incarnation: Some Radical Molinist Suggestions," (paper presented at the Wheaton Philosophy Conference, Wheaton, Illinois, October 2000).

<sup>32</sup> Amos Yong, "Divining 'Divine Action' in Theology and Science," *Zygon* 43, no. 1 (March 2008): 191-200; Patrick Richmond, "Divine Action and Modern Science" *Faith and Philosophy* 23, no. 3 (July 2006): 350-355; Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, C. J. Isham, eds., *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1999); Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger and Francisco J. Ayala, eds., *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1998); Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger and George V. Coyne, eds., *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding* (Vatican State City: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1988). For a solid summary of the fruit of the Vatican Observatory consult Wesley J. Wildman, "The Divine Action Project, 1988-2003," *Theology and Science* 2, no. 1 (2004): 31-75.

of the literature tends to be apologetic. For the most part, the discussion tends to examine the relation between science and theology. And divine action often serves as a test case.

The discussion usually focuses on the nature of the cosmos as a whole or the nature of natural laws in particular. With regard to the cosmos as a whole, according to Robert Russell, the key issue has to do with the extent to which God preserves and governs the natural world. Until recently, the debate has focused on God's special activity within a closed, mechanical (Newtonian) universe.<sup>33</sup> Russell points out that because of new 'open' trends in cosmology, physics, evolutionary and molecular biology, and psychology, there are more models available to theologians to conceive of special divine action than previously imagined.<sup>34</sup> The idea here is that in a mechanical model of the cosmos, there is little or no room for God to operate. However, in an open model of the cosmos, there is room for God to act. Thus, scholars are no longer burdened with the impossible task of thinking about God's activity in a closed, deterministic, and mechanical universe.

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<sup>33</sup> Robert J. Russell, "Does 'The God Who Acts' Really Act?" *Theology Today* 54 (April 1997): 43-65.

<sup>34</sup> Among the new models, he argues for something called "noninterventionist objective special divine action," Russell, "Does 'The God Who Acts' Really Act?," 51. For examples of some of these trends consult *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature*, ed. Russell et al.; *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, eds. Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger and Francisco J. Ayala (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1998); *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding*, eds. Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger and George V. Coyne (Vatican State City: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1988). For examples of the relation between divine action and evolution consult Robin Collins, "Divine Action and Evolution," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, eds. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rae (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 241-261; Thomas Tracey, "Evolutionary Theologies and Divine Action," *Zygon* 6, no. 1 (2008): 107-116.

Part of the discussion is more specific, though, and focuses on the nature (i.e., the contingency or necessity) of natural laws. It also has to do with the precise way in which God operates alongside or against these laws. This has occasioned a debate between secondary causation and occasionalism. The former argues that creatures have secondary causal power, but God has primary causal power. The latter argues that God alone has causal power.<sup>35</sup>

Philip Clayton writes that claims of modern science have made divine action the central problem in modern theology. Clayton puts the problem this way,

To do science is generally to presuppose that the universe is a closed physical system, that interactions are regular and lawlike, that all causal histories can be traced, and that anomalies will ultimately have physical explanations. Unfortunately, the traditional way of asserting that God acts in the world conflicts with all four of these conditions. It presupposes that the universe is open, that God acts from time to time according to particular purposes, that the ultimate source and explanation of these actions is the divine will, and that no earthly account would ever suffice to explain God's intentions.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, the methods of science do not allow for claims about God's activity in the world. As he has suggested elsewhere, *methodological* naturalism, which is so ingrained in the mindset of modern people, creates a culture of doubt or skepticism with regard to

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<sup>35</sup> For example, cf. some of the essays in *Divine and Human Action*, ed. Thomas V. Morris, especially Jonathan L. Kvanvig and Hugh J. McCann, "Divine Conservation and the Persistence of the World," Philip L. Quinn, "Divine Conservation, Secondary Causes, and Occasionalism," and Alfred J. Freddoso, "Medieval Aristotelianism and the Case against Secondary Causation in Nature."

<sup>36</sup> Philip Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008) 186. See also Ross L. Stein, "The Action of God in the World – A Synthesis of Process Thought in Science and Theology," *Theology and Science* 4, no. 1 (2006): 51-69.

divine action.<sup>37</sup> That is, the problem with modern science is not necessarily *metaphysical*. The methods of modern science simply leave no room for us to talk about divine action in our contemporary context.

In *Adventures in the Spirit*, Clayton sets out to make room for divine action talk. He examines the convergence of an open view of the cosmos and a panentheistic view of the God-world relation.<sup>38</sup> Since divine action is the central problem for modern theology, Clayton uses this concept as a test case. However, Clayton's naturalism still prevents him from talking about God's activity in a strict causal sense.<sup>39</sup>

Clayton then argues for a panentheistic-participatory theory of divine action. He admits that his theory does not solve the causal problem. However, panentheism does provide a framework with which to understand divine action. He suggests that we can locate divine action at the mental level.<sup>40</sup> In fact, under his theory, all finite action could be understood as divine action.<sup>41</sup> Of course, this does not solve the problem exactly. This theory seems merely to reduce divine acts to finite acts.

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<sup>37</sup> Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997) 9-12.

<sup>38</sup> Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, 64-87.

<sup>39</sup> Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, 192-200.

<sup>40</sup> Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, 210-216.

<sup>41</sup> Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit*, 197-203.



### 3. Analysis and Evaluation of the Contemporary Landscape

This section provides an analysis and evaluation in three parts. Part one identifies the greater problematic issues in articulating and understanding divine action. Part two identifies the main solutions for dealing with the problems identified in part one. Part three evaluates the narrow approach of these solutions and makes a suggestion for a more theological approach.

#### 3.1. The Main Problems with Understanding and Articulating Divine Action

Why is it that scholars discuss divine action in the context of language, the nature of the divine agent, the relation between divine and human action, and the relation between divine action and the natural order? That is, why is it that these are the main trends in the scholarship?

Chapter one mentioned Gilkey's assessment that the problem of evil, the reality of creaturely freedom and autonomy, and modern science were seen as problematic when talking about and understanding God's activity in the world. For these reasons, argued Gilkey, providence was absent from theological discussion. And even though this judgment was made in 1963, Gilkey's evaluation remains fitting for the contemporary scene. Granted, these problems do not silence scholars like they once reportedly did, but these problems occupy considerable space in the current discussion on the concept of divine action.

In short, the problems that Gilkey identified have not gone away, and much of the literature focuses on addressing these problems. The problem of evil seemingly creates a crisis between the idea of divine activity and divine attributes (e.g., God's moral goodness, omnipotence, and omniscience).<sup>42</sup> Creaturely freedom and autonomy seemingly creates a crisis between the idea of divine activity and some other divine attributes (e.g., God's faithfulness to created autonomy and divine transcendence), but it also creates a crisis for understanding God's activity in relation to human activity.<sup>43</sup> For some, modern science creates a crisis for talking about God's activity by rendering the concept of divine action expendable, and for others knowledge of natural causes and events creates problems in understanding *how* God acts alongside, against, or without natural causes.<sup>44</sup> Because of the preoccupation with these problems, the literature tends to focus on defending the concept of divine action or, as pointed out in chapter one, providing alternatives to the traditional notion of divine action.

Arguably, the problems that Gilkey identified and the same problems that are prevalent in the current literature are not new. It would not take much effort to demonstrate that Augustine, Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Karl Barth, Brunner,

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<sup>42</sup> See for example William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989) and Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

<sup>43</sup> See for example Thomas V. Morris, ed., *Divine and Human Action: Essays in the Metaphysics of Theism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

<sup>44</sup> See for example Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, C. J. Isham, eds., *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1999); Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger and Francisco J. Ayala, eds., *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1998).

and others were aware of these issues, and that they spent a good deal of time on them.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps current scholars think that the problems which have been mentioned are more pressing than scholars in the past, but it would be a mistake to assume that historic Christian thought has thought nothing of these issues. It would equally be a mistake to think that historic Christian thought took these issues lightly.

While agreeing with Gilkey's assessment, Owen Thomas further identifies the contemporary preoccupation with problems associated with the concept of divine action:

the breakdown of liberal theology, the contemporary sense of the meaninglessness of history, the existentialist tendency to limit the lordship of God to the inner self, the modern emphasis on human freedom and the autonomy of nature, and the resulting tendency to limit theology to the articulation of the inward relation to God.<sup>46</sup>

Thomas's evaluation of the contemporary fixation with the problems adds new insight. Still, there is a consensus that the problem of evil, creaturely freedom and autonomy, and modern science create problems for making sense of divine action, and the discussion reflects this assessment by fixating on solutions to these problems.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> For some recent thought on the historical awareness of the problems see *Human and Divine Agency*, eds. F. Michael McLain and W. Mark Richardson (Lanham: University Press of America, Inc., 1999).

<sup>46</sup> Owen C. Thomas, *Introduction to Theology* (Wilton, Connecticut: Morehouse-Barlow Co., Inc., 1983), 110.

<sup>47</sup> Horton makes a similar assessment. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology*, 50.

### 3.2. The Main Solutions

Now that we know what the issues are, how have contemporary scholars responded to these issues? How do they understand and make predications of divine action? Thomas outlines five approaches that scholars have recently taken.<sup>48</sup>

Thomas identifies the first position as the **primary-secondary cause** theory, also known as the **double agency** theory. According to Thomas, this is the traditional view in Christian thought, elaborated by Aquinas and followed by Calvin, Protestant orthodoxy, and modern neo-Thomism. It is held, for example, by such scholars as Austin Farrer and Etienne Gilson.<sup>49</sup> Essentially, this view holds that God is the primary cause of all activity in creation, yet God usually acts through secondary causes. Both the primary cause and the secondary causes are said to be fully active in all events. That is, both causes simultaneously bring about the same state of affairs.<sup>50</sup> Because both the divine and creaturely agent are active in the event, God maintains his providential control of events and creation maintains its autonomy and freedom in bringing events about. Thus, this position employs a theory of double agency in order to understand how an event could, say, be brought about by two different agents.

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas, *Introduction to Theology*, 112-115 and Owen C. Thomas, "Summary Analysis," *God's Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem*, ed. Owen C. Thomas (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983), 231-234.

<sup>49</sup> Austin Farrer, "Grace and Freewill," "Anima Mundi," in *God's Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem*, ed. Owen C. Thomas (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983), 195-212; Etienne Gilson, "The Corporeal World and the Efficacy of Second Causes," in *God's Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem*, ed. Owen C. Thomas (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983), 213-230.

<sup>50</sup> Owen C. Thomas, *Introduction to Theology* (Wilton, Connecticut: Morehouse-Barelow Co., Inc., 1983), 113.

Thomas calls the second position the **uniform action** theory. This position views God's activity as universal and uniform, not special or particular. A state of affairs that appears to be the result of a special divine action only seems so because of the variety of human responses to God's uniform activity. This position seems to be untroubled by the generic concept of God's general providence, but it is convinced that special providence, miracles, and the like, are out of the question because of moral, scientific, and autonomy concerns. Thomas asserts that the only one who currently holds this position is Wiles, and yet Wiles does not offer an adequate analogy in order to help one understand this position.<sup>51</sup> This view also sounds similar to a type of deism that became popular in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>52</sup>

The third position is called the **two perspectives** theory. In this theory, natural and supernatural explanations for a given state of affairs are not incompatible, but rather two different ways of looking at the same state of affairs. Thomas writes, “[The two perspectives] are expressed in two different languages, that of scientific description and that of faith assertions about the purpose and activity of God.”<sup>53</sup> However, this is not a model of how God acts in the world. This position merely states that the relationship between the faith perspective of talking about God's activity in the world and the

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<sup>51</sup> Thomas, *God's Activity in the World*, 232.

<sup>52</sup> Bavinck defines deism as the view that once God creates creatures, he “allows them to exist and function on their own power, a power received at the time of creation.” Herman Bavinck, *In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999).

<sup>53</sup> Thomas, *God's Activity in the World*, 232-233. Brackets are mine.

scientific perspective of talking about the world's natural process are logically compatible. However, no solution or analogy is provided that seeks to make sense of God's activity in the context of the problems we have identified. Thomas rightly feels dissatisfied with this theory.

The fourth position is called the **personal action analogy**. This position compares God's activity in the world to human activity in the world. Essentially, this position holds that "[God's action] involves an intention to fulfill a purpose and effects changes in the world which are interventions in the finite causal nexus."<sup>54</sup> Thomas notes that this position is more of an analogy than a theory since it does not explain the relationship between divine action and creaturely action.<sup>55</sup> In other words, this theory does not explain the precise relationship between God and creaturely action, for example, in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. According to Thomas, because this position is not clear in explaining the causal nexus, it does not satisfactorily deal with the problems we have identified. However, the position does indicate the intention of God's activity in the event, and so it's appropriate to say that the crucifixion was brought about with good intentions by God, and at the same time, the event was simultaneously brought about with evil intentions by humanity. However, we do not know the precise relationship between the two causes, divine and human. So the double agency theory looms large here as well. And as Thomas points out, Farrer and Vernon White would argue that the 'causal joint'

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas, *Introduction to Theology*, 114.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas, *God's Activity in the World*, 232.

between divine and creaturely actions, the 'how' of double agency, is beyond our understanding.<sup>56</sup> Thomas is dissatisfied with this solution because of the inherent mystery of the causal joint.

Thomas calls the fifth position **process theory**. This is the position offered by Schubert Ogden, John Cobb, and David Griffin.<sup>57</sup> Essentially, the process theory holds that God acts persuasively in all events and never acts unilaterally. Thomas writes,

The process theologians see God as active in all events as one efficient cause among many others. According to the process view God acts in the world by influence or persuasion. By being prehended or experienced God offers to each emergent event or actual occasion an initial aim which the event may accept in varying degrees.<sup>58</sup>

Thomas notes that analogies of "self-body, mind-brain, and self-constitution" are offered in order to help one understand this position.<sup>59</sup> This position gives maximum autonomy to creation that apparently removes the problems which plague understanding and talking about divine action.

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<sup>56</sup> Owen Thomas, "Recent Thought on Divine Agency," *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer*, eds. Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 40.

<sup>57</sup> David R. Griffin, "Revelation, Divine Causation, and Biblical Theology," *Encounter* 36 (1975): 342-360, *Reenchantment without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976; reprint, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1991); Schubert M. Ogden, "What Sense Does It Make to Say, 'God Acts in History?'" and John B. Cobb, Jr., "Natural Causality and Divine Action," in *God's Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem*, ed. Owen C. Thomas (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983).

<sup>58</sup> Thomas, *Introduction to Theology*, 114.

<sup>59</sup> Thomas, *God's Activity in the World*, 232.

### 3.3. Evaluation of Contemporary Approaches and Solutions

While evaluating the five positions, Thomas states that they do not all address the problems in the same way. Some of the positions are theories, some are analogies, and some offer both. He notes that the personal action position is primarily an analogy. The primary cause and process views are primarily theories, but both offer analogies that support the theory. The uniform action theory, according to Thomas, offers neither a robust theory nor an analogy. Finally, the two perspectives view offers an analogy but no theory.

Another point that Thomas makes is that the solutions are not answering the same question. Let's look at the question at hand. How could it be that God acts in the world? Thomas outlines six relevant understandings of *how* to our question. He states them as follows:

1. By what means? E.g., God acts in the world through secondary causes.
2. In what way or manner? E.g., God acts in the world uniformly, purposively, persuasively.
3. To what effect? E.g., God acts in the world to heal diseases and to inspire good actions.
4. With what meaning or for what reason or purpose? E.g., God acts in the world to achieve the divine purposes of justice and peace.
5. To what extent or degree? E.g., God acts in the world everywhere and always.
6. On analogy with what? E.g., God acts in the world as the mind acts on the brain.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas, "Summary Analysis," 234-235.



Thomas's point here is that a comprehensive model of divine action should at least attempt to deal with all of these understandings of how.

But the fact of the matter is that most accounts of divine action do not deal with all of these questions. Thomas writes,

[T]he various views [of divine action] we are considering are interpreting the question formally rather than materially. As might be expected they are addressing primarily the questions of the means, manner, and extent of the divine activity rather than its content or purpose. It is clear that the various approaches can be compared only in so far as they are treating the same question. Much of the debate between the various views is vitiated by failure to observe this.<sup>61</sup>

Thomas then asserts that any successful articulation of divine action should include a robust metaphysical theory and an analogy or model. In other words, Thomas rightly suggests that a theory and analogy of divine action should make an attempt to deal with the different aspects of "how."

Thomas argues that the process view stands alone in satisfactorily dealing with the issues.<sup>62</sup> By suggesting that only the process view comes close, Thomas implies that the primary-secondary cause position (as currently articulated) fails, and the rest of the positions do not come close to being comprehensive enough to be taken seriously.

In a recent essay, Thomas points out the inadequacy of analogies used by the primary-secondary cause or double agency theory, and he articulates his approval of

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<sup>61</sup> Thomas, "Summary Analysis," 235.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas, *God's Activity in the World*, 234.

process analogies.<sup>63</sup> His basic complaint for the double agency view is that both the primary and secondary causes qualify as sufficient conditions for the event to take place, and that if both causes qualify as sufficient conditions, then the idea is self-contradictory.

He writes,

One solution to this problem is to loosen the definition of double agency and follow the lead of process theology. Then neither the divine nor the creaturely agent is a sufficient cause of the event. There is a duality of causes but no unity of action. The two causes are complementary, and each contributes a distinct part to the event.<sup>64</sup>

In essence, Thomas is suggesting that in order to make sense of the double agency position, both the primary and the secondary causes need to qualify as necessary (and not sufficient) conditions in order for a state of affairs to be brought about, and when both causes are considered together, then they are sufficient conditions to bring about a state of affairs. With this modification to the double agency position, Thomas is arguing for a more process-like approach to divine action.

Charles Wood agrees with Thomas and argues that the idea of double agency—the idea that two distinct agents perform the same action simultaneously and the result is one effect—is incoherent. He writes, “Your act of *x*-ing (singing, say) cannot be simultaneously my act of *x*-ing. If you and I are *x*-ing at the same time, or even if we are *x*-ing together, there are still two acts of *x*-ing involved—unless it is really a joint act

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<sup>63</sup> Thomas, “Recent Thought on Divine Agency,” 50.

<sup>64</sup> Thomas, “Recent Thought on Divine Agency,” 50.

to which we are each making a (specifiable) contribution.”<sup>65</sup> In other words, the idea of double agency entails that the two agents are identical, and this idea is incoherent. What we ought to assert, argues Wood, is that both agents simultaneously and cooperatively bring about the event. This loosens up the primary-secondary cause analogy for which Thomas was hoping.<sup>66</sup> Again, we are not left with a modified double agency position, but rather another process position.

If Woods and Thomas are right, then the process view or a reconstructed double agency solution appear to be the only contemporary options for making sense of divine action. According to Thomas, only the process view addresses a wide range of aspects of divine action.<sup>67</sup> And according to both Woods and Thomas, the double agency theory appears to be problematic. But perhaps other options are better developed than Thomas would indicate. We should keep in mind that Thomas is commenting on how recent scholars attempt to deal with the contemporary issues associated with divine action. Thus, the list that Thomas gives us is not necessarily exhaustive, and yet it is a good description of the current climate.

Because scholars have been preoccupied with the problems associated with articulating and understanding the concept of divine action, scholars are not developing models that address issues identified by Thomas. There are two relevant questions here.

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<sup>65</sup> Charles M. Wood, “How Does God Act?” *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 no. 2 (July 1999): 148.

<sup>66</sup> For more on the problems of double agency, cf. Vincent Brümmer, “Farrer, Wiles and the Causal Joint,” *Modern Theology* 8 (January 1992): 1-14.

<sup>67</sup> Thomas, “Recent Thought on Divine Agency,” 50.

Should scholars occupy themselves with the problems we have identified (and perhaps other problems as well)? The answer to this question is clearly yes. Scholars should defend the concept of divine action against various objections. There is another question. Should scholars *merely* occupy themselves with the problems we have identified? The answer is clearly no.

Alvin Plantinga instructively declared that Christian scholars ought to display more boldness, independence, faith, and integrality in their Christian scholarship. That is to say, Christian scholars should not always have to defend their enterprise to critics. He argues that it is “perfectly proper to start from what we know as Christians.”<sup>68</sup> If Plantinga’s prophetic call is applied to our context, then Christian scholars should not *only* concern themselves with problems associated with understanding divine action. Rather, scholars should also spend time articulating divine action in the context of what they already know or at least believe to be true about God’s activity. And perhaps by looking at what God does and who God is, scholars can formulate concepts of divine action that also address some of the main problems associated with the concept.

As pointed out earlier, and by Thomas’s own admission, the problems that contemporary scholars have concerning God’s activity have not always been pressing ones. From Augustine to Protestant orthodoxy in the seventeenth century, theologians boldly articulated divine action, although perhaps under different categories like

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<sup>68</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “Advice to Christian Philosophers,” in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 297.

providence, miracles, and election. Does it follow that if historical ideas of divine action fail to acknowledge and deal with the pressing issues of today, then these ideas are not relevant? Thomas would not want to argue this. In fact, Thomas's complaint is that within the *contemporary* discussion only the process view comes close to developing a model or analogy and theory of divine action. That is, in the current literature, no other position has done more than the process view has in dealing with problems usually associated with the concept of divine action. If this is true, then non-process types of Christian theologians have work to do.

One way to begin developing models of divine action, then, is to look at some theologians and systems of theology. Arguably, non-process theologians—including Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Brunner—have already dealt with the topic of divine action either as a metaphysical foundation for divine attributes and for other theological issues such as the incarnation and the resurrection.<sup>69</sup>

In addition, divine action is sometimes treated directly in the context of God's work in Creation, Redemption, and Consummation. To be sure, such non-process theologians of past and present are aware of the problems raised above, but these problems did not prevent them from talking about and understanding God's activity. There are other options to consider.

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<sup>69</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. Olive Wyon, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950), *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, trans. Olive Wyon, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1952), *The Christian Doctrine of Church, Faith and the Consummation*, trans. David Cairns in collaboration with T. H. L. Parker, vol. 3 (London: Lutterworth Press, 1962); Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley and R. J. Ehrlich, vol. 3, part 3 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1960); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991).

For a moment, consider again Thomas's conclusion that in the current literature only the process view comes close to developing a model or analogy and theory of divine action.

On the one hand, there is some evidence to suggest that his conclusion is a bit premature. In his lament that the subject of providence has disappeared from theological discussion, Gilkey notes one exception in the thought of Barth. Gilkey writes that Barth's doctrine of providence does everything for which he has been calling.<sup>70</sup> In addition, open theism has been extremely active in defending its concept of divine action against process theism and Calvinism.<sup>71</sup> There has also been a wealth of literature in discussions on the relation between divine foreknowledge and human freedom, which has been influenced by Plantinga and Flint. Perhaps there are more options. Thus, perhaps Thomas's conclusion is a bit near-sighted because of his focus on the problems of understanding and articulating divine action.

On the other hand, Thomas is on to something. After all, Gilkey claimed that outside of Barth, the topic of providence is absent from theological discussion. Gwynne makes a similar assertion when he writes that the concept of special divine action "does not enjoy a prominent place in theological discussion and is often treated summarily in theological works."<sup>72</sup> However, Gwynne also argues that despite the absence of

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<sup>70</sup> Gilkey, "The Concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology," 17.

<sup>71</sup> We will examine some of these issues in part 4 of this chapter.

<sup>72</sup> Gwynne, *Special Divine Action*, 15.

theological discussion, there is a wealth of literature on the topic of divine action. And as noted above, most of this literature has a philosophical, biblical, or scientific focus.

In addition, Tracy claims that by spending so much time defending the concept of divine action from its critics, scholars have abstracted the concept from its religious and theological roots.<sup>73</sup> According to Tracy, the result is that much of the discussion fails to be relevant to the faith traditions that believe in God's activity in the first place.

A reasonable inference from Tracy's claim is that scholars should also be concerned with the concept of divine action in the context of what God does and other theological convictions that people have about God such as who God is. That is, scholars should provide models of divine action that are not only candidates of logical possibility but which also claim to be true and meaningful and close to the doctrinal roots which gave rise to the idea of divine action in the first place.

Here is what can be concluded so far. First, most of the current literature focuses on four main areas: the status of our language about a God who acts; the nature of the divine agent; the relation between divine and human action; and the relation between the divine agent and the natural order. Second, these trends came about because of various obstacles in articulating the concept of divine action, including (but not necessarily limited to) the problem of evil, the reality of human freedom and autonomy, and modern science. Third, recent responses to these obstacles have led to a variety of views on the

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<sup>73</sup> Thomas F. Tracy, "Evil, Human Freedom, and Divine Grace," *Human and Divine Agency*, eds. F. Michael McLain and W. Mark Richardson (Lanham: University Press of America, 1999), 167. Here, Tracy is making his comment in the context of the problem of evil, but it might as well have been an indictment on literature that features the topic of divine action.

concept of divine action. And fourth, according to some, theological issues are absent from the current discussion on divine action.

The claim that theological issues are absent from the discussion seems to be the most perplexing. After all, scholars are rightly defending and trying to properly understand God's activity in the world in the face of various obstacles. And at first glance, these obstacles appear to be serious enough to demand serious response. As a result, it should come as no surprise that there are a variety of views on divine action. Nevertheless, theological investigation into who God is and what God actually does is unmistakably absent from much of the discussion even though these issues give rise to the concept of divine action in the first place.

As pointed out in chapter one, the notion of divine action seems to be implicit in Christian experience, in Christian texts, and also in Christian theology. Thus, at least one worthwhile question is, "What can we learn about divine action from Christian theology?" Can theological investigation illuminate the concept of God's activity in the world? For example, how could the notion that God is love impact our understanding of divine action? How could the notion that God is Lord of the universe impact how scholars understand the relation between divine action and natural processes? How can God's redeeming work explain the relation between divine and human action? Is it possible that these issues can both directly and indirectly respond to some of the problems associated with the notion of divine action? These are important questions that demand a response, but the literature is mostly silent to this end.



The rest of the chapter will start to think in the direction that investigating what God does and who God is are relevant to the concept of divine action. A step in this direction can be found in Terrance Tiessen's monograph, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?*, in which he examines various concepts of divine action.<sup>74</sup> These models range from semi-deistic to fatalistic conceptions of divine action.

One value in looking at the models which Tiessen outlines is that his work demonstrates the variety of ways in which scholars understand God's activity in the world.<sup>75</sup> Another value in looking at the various Tiessen's work is that the variety of models demonstrates that Thomas's assertion—that the process view is the only contemporary view which has articulated a theory, model or analogy of divine action—is probably false. In addition, it is also helpful to see the spectrum of divine involvement for the various positions, ranging from minimal to maximal involvement. And finally, at least some of the models that Tiessen presents are theologically informed.<sup>76</sup>

But before these models are examined, a definition of a model will be advanced and some assumptions will be established in order to limit the investigation.

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<sup>74</sup> Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

<sup>75</sup> See especially Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer*, 24-206

#### 4. Understanding a Model

This section has two parts. Part 1 describes some assumptions that will be made in the course of this dissertation. Part 2 describes the concept of model that will be used in this dissertation.

##### 4.1. Conceptual Categories of Divine Action

To begin with, there are wide-ranging logical possibilities for conceptualizing divine action. Naturalism, for example, holds that

(1') God does not exist.

If (1') were true, then presumably it is also true that

(a') God does not act in the world.

The upshot is that if (1') were true, then it would not make sense to talk about God's activity since God does not exist. The best one could do is think about the community's experience *as if* God acts.

Another option is pantheistic conceptions of divine action. Let us assume that pantheism or some version of pantheism asserts something close to the following:

(2') God is the world.

If (2') were true, then what would the conceptual category for divine action look like?

There are a number of answers to this question, but they all would probably fall under the main idea that

(b') God's actions are identical to events in the world.

To be sure, both (1') and (2') are ways of thinking about God or lack of God. But for the purpose of this dissertation, my starting point is within traditional Christian thought. Thus, I will assume the following:

- (1) God exists,
- (2) God created the world,
- (3) The world exists,
- (4) God acts in the world,

and

- (5) We can make meaningful, literal claims about God's action in the world.

What remains, then, is to articulate (4), that is, to state how it could be that God acts. But before we conceptualize (4), we need to define what we mean by 'concept' or 'model.'

#### 4.2. What is a Model?

What sort of thing is a model? Answering this question is no easy task because there is no consensus on the definition. To make matters more complicated, in some respects, 'theory,' 'model,' and 'analogy' are used interchangeably. However, it is not the object of this section to argue for a specific definition, but rather to clarify and articulate the basic idea of 'model' to be used in this dissertation while keeping in mind the variety of answers to the question.

To begin with, Plantinga articulates what he means by model. Plantinga writes, "The rough idea is this: to give a model of a proposition or state of affairs *S* is to show

*how it could be* that *S* is true or actual.”<sup>77</sup> He adds that a model is not identical to the proposition or state of affairs *S*, but rather “will be another proposition (or state of affairs), one such that it is clear (1) that it is possible and (2) that if it is *true*, then so is the target proposition.”<sup>78</sup> The general sense of model, for Plantinga, then, is that a model is an account or construal of some state of affairs. It is an attempt to understand something (a state of affairs) by way of something else (a model).

However, as mentioned above, there is no consensus in defining ‘model.’ Frederick Ferré outlines six different views of models.<sup>79</sup> One view of models takes them “to be essentially mechanical contrivances designed to illuminate, by their working, the meaning of scientific theory.”<sup>80</sup> Second, some understand models as “primarily scale reproductions (larger or smaller) of an object or type of object being studied.”<sup>81</sup> Third, models are understood as a mental picture of some physical theory. Fourth, some argue that models do not describe theories but are *used* in theory construction. Ferré adds that the fourth view denies that theories can be mentally pictured and need physical construction to make sense of the model. Fifth, agreeing that ‘model’ refers to what cannot be pictured, models are “equivalent to ‘analogue,’ and thus applicable to wholly

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<sup>77</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 168.

<sup>78</sup> Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 168.

<sup>79</sup> Frederick Ferré, “Mapping the Logic of Models,” *New Essays on Religious Language*, ed. Dallas M. High (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 56-59. For more on models also cf. Sir James Jeans, *Physics and Philosophy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1943) and Richard Bevan Braithwaite, *Scientific Explanation: A Study of the Function of Theory, Probability and Law in Science* (Cambridge: The Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, 1953; reprinted 1955), chapter 4.

<sup>80</sup> Ferré, “Mapping the Logic of Models,” 57.

formal and unpicturable domains of thought.”<sup>82</sup> Sixth, others claim that the key issue in models is not one of “picturability” but in the value of the model as a tool for understanding a theory.<sup>83</sup>

With that being said, for Ferré the general idea of model is to “make sense” of a theory. He writes, a model is “that which provides epistemological vividness or immediacy to a theory by offering as an interpretation of the abstract of unfamiliar theory-structure something that both fits the logical form of a theory and is well known.”<sup>84</sup> Ferré also admits that the issue of models is usually found in the realm of science. However, science is not the only discipline that is permitted to use a model in order to understand a theory or state of affairs. Ferré writes that theology can use, and in fact has, an abundance of models. He claims that parables in the NT and stories in the OT can function as models that articulate supernatural reality. He goes on to assert that models are essential for interpreting our theological discourse and are essential for articulating religious beliefs.<sup>85</sup>

Ferré’s approval of models for theological discourse does not come without warnings, though. He reiterates that models are still *models*. As Braithwaite writes, “This danger is that of transferring the logical necessity of some of the features of the

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<sup>81</sup> Ferré, “Mapping the Logic of Models,” 57.

<sup>82</sup> Ferré, “Mapping the Logic of Models,” 58.

<sup>83</sup> Ferré, “Mapping the Logic of Models,” 58-59.

<sup>84</sup> Ferré, “Mapping the Logic of Models,” 75.

<sup>85</sup> Ferré, “Mapping the Logic of Models,” 83.

chosen model on to the theory, and thus of supposing, wrongly, that the theory, or parts of the theory, have a logical necessity which is in fact fictitious.”<sup>86</sup> That is, models are not identical to the state of affairs or theory, and so are prone to have “logically irrelevant” features that are taken to be logically relevant.<sup>87</sup> Despite these warnings, though, models can be useful in understanding a theory and state of affairs. Models help us make sense of observations and raw data. Models also help us to give an account of an aspect of reality but also can illuminate how a particular model relates to other models.

The basic idea of ‘model’ offered by both Plantinga and Ferré is adequate for the purpose of this dissertation.<sup>88</sup> Ferré’s idea of “making sense” or providing “epistemological vividness” of *S* is similar to Plantinga’s ‘how it could be’ that *S*. The idea of both Ferré and Plantinga is that models are tools for understanding some state of affairs or theory.

The general idea of model that will be employed is as follows. To give a model of divine action is to *make sense* of the state of affairs *S* ‘God acts.’ Or, using Plantinga’s sense of model, to give a model of divine action is to state *how it could be* that *S* is true. The purpose of the model is to give “epistemological vividness,” understanding, or clarity to the idea of God’s activity in the world. In addition, we need to take the warnings of

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<sup>86</sup> Braithwaite, *Scientific Explanation*, 94.

<sup>87</sup> Ferré, “Mapping the Logic of Models,” 69.

<sup>88</sup> The argument of the dissertation does not rest on the definition of model that is given. Therefore, if one disagrees with the definition that is provided, then the argument of the dissertation is not affected.

Ferré seriously. Models of divine action are just that, models. They are not identical with *S*, but if the model is true, then so is *S*.

So back to the question of the dissertation. How could it be that God acts in the world? How do we ‘make sense’ of God’s activity? How do we understand the state of affairs ‘God acts’? The next section outlines and evaluates Tiessen’s description of various models of divine action.

## **5. Models of Divine Action**

This section contains three main parts. Part one looks at the way in which Tiessen organizes his description of models of divine action. Part two briefly examines his models. Part three analyzes and evaluates Tiessen’s approach.

### 5.1. Organization of Tiessen’s Models of Divine Action

There are three organizational characteristics in Tiessen’s presentation of models of divine action.

The first characteristic concerns the extent of divine involvement in creation. Tiessen writes,

In presenting the models that I have identified for study, I will move from the one that perceives the least involvement of God in the details of history to the one that puts the outcome of events most strongly in the hands of God.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer*, 24-25.

That is, Tiessen describes the models of divine action according to the extent of divine involvement. These models range from semi-deistic to fatalistic conceptions of divine action. Tiessen then proposes his own model of divine action that tends to view the events of history as coming heavily from the hands of God.

A second feature of Tiessen's organization concerns the degree of human autonomy. He writes,

[The models] could be considered on a spectrum that correlates divine and human agency, with the first model giving maximum effect to human agency and the last giving least significance to the action of humans in history.<sup>90</sup>

In other words, his presentation of models begins with a maximum amount of human autonomy—suggesting that humanity has a strong hand in determining the outcome of events—and ends with a minimum amount of human autonomy—suggesting that humanity has little or no hand in determining the outcome of events.

Third, he makes a distinction between models of divine action that are of the “risk” variety and models of the “no-risk” variety. When a model of divine action is “risky,” the rough idea is that God takes some personal risk in creating creatures with a significant amount of freedom. That is, God could be surprised, and God's desired event may not come about because creatures self-determine their own outcome which may be different from what God wanted to be brought about. When a model of divine action is considered to be of the “no-risk” variety, the rough idea is that God guarantees that his

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<sup>90</sup> Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer*, 25.



purposes are brought about regardless of the activity of creatures. That is, God is not surprised, and his desires, intentions, purposes, and so on, are always brought about. Tiessen states that six models of divine action are of the “risk” variety. Four of the models are of the “no-risk” variety.

## 5.2. Tiessen’s Models of Divine Action

As mentioned in the previous section, Tiessen’s presentation of models of divine action begins with the least amount of divine involvement and progresses to models which claim maximal divine involvement in the world. However, it is not necessary to go into great detail with these models. The object of this section is to show the variety of responses to our question, and so this section will emphasize the main features of each model.

The first concept he names the semi-deist model. This model corresponds to the uniform action theory defined earlier in the chapter. It is a position that is primarily held and defended by Wiles and Kaufman. The main concern with this theory is to protect God’s moral goodness by suggesting that God does not intervene in the world because to do so would make God responsible for allowing some and not others to experience evil.<sup>91</sup> In other words, proponents of this view wonder why God intervenes at some times and not others. The articulation of this view is also motivated by the challenges of modern science.

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<sup>91</sup> Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer*, 34-46. Also see Maurice Wiles, *God’s Action in the World* (London: SCM Press, 1986) and Gordon D. Kaufman, “On the Meaning of ‘Act of God,’” *Harvard Theological Review* 61, no. 2 (April 1968): 175.

Another model that corresponds to a position examined earlier in this chapter is the process model. The process model's main concern, according to Tiessen, is to conceptualize God's activity in such a way that does not hinder creaturely freedom and autonomy. This position asserts that the traditional notion of divine action, which understands God as the primary cause and creatures as mere secondary causes, needs to be corrected. God remains highly active in this view—and so this view does not fall neatly in Tiessen's organizational spectrum—but God's influence is seen as persuasive and not sovereign. Thus, even though God may be highly active, it is not up to God for a state of affairs to be brought about, but rather it is the self-determination of human agents that brings things about. These states of affairs, which are brought about by creaturely freedom, could be consistent with or contrary to God's desire.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, this model does not claim that God *limits* his own control over which state of affairs is brought about, but rather claims that God is by nature *not in a position to control* which state of affairs is brought about.

Tiessen also presents a Thomist and Barthian model of divine action that corresponds to the double agency or primary-secondary causation view we examined earlier in this chapter. According to Tiessen, the Barthian model places more control over which state of affairs is brought about than the Thomist model. But generally speaking, both models maintain that nothing falls outside of God's sovereign control. Creaturely freedom and autonomy is maintained by asserting that God is the primary cause of everything that occurs and that human agents cooperate in bringing things about

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<sup>92</sup> Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer*, 53-67.

as secondary causes. Tiessen argues that Barth's view of providence is different from both the Thomist and Calvinist models mainly because of his emphasis on Christ. Tiessen writes that, according to Barth, "Only Christ is the revelation of God and hence God's work in the whole range of human history must be viewed within the context of his gracious purpose for creation that was both revealed and accomplished in Christ."<sup>93</sup> In addition, his account of the Barthian model indicates a closer relationship between Barth's view of providence and covenant than other models which Tiessen presents. Perhaps Barth's attention to providence in the context of the covenant is what Gilkey meant when he suggested that only Barth, among his contemporaries, discusses divine action within a theological context.<sup>94</sup>

In addition to the models we have already examined, Tiessen examines six other models of divine action: (1) the open model, (2) redemptive intervention model, (3) the church dominion model, (4) the Molinist model, (5) the Calvinist model, and (6) the fatalist model. Fatalism, however, will not be looked at because to my knowledge there are no current theologians who hold this view. Each of the other models will be described in turn.

The open concept of divine action—as articulated by such theologians and philosophers as Pinnock, Sanders, Basinger and Hasker—has prompted much debate since the publication of *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional*

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<sup>93</sup> Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer*, 206.

<sup>94</sup> Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer*, 206.

*Understanding of God.*<sup>95</sup> What perhaps started out as a critique of more traditional notions of providence has recently enjoyed fuller theological articulations of divine action.<sup>96</sup> Essentially, open theism claims that God is limited to the extent that human agents voluntarily make decisions, but it also emphasizes God's responsiveness to creation rather than God's sovereign rule. This position does not rule out the possibility of God unilaterally controlling other earthly events. Nor does this position imply that God cannot influence and persuade the agent, either internally or externally; what it does maintain is that the agent must retain a significant amount of libertarian freedom. In addition, this position does not deny that God may unilaterally control, at times, human choices, yet those choices cannot remain voluntary. Therefore, this position seems to imply that while God can guarantee that his plan will be carried out providentially, he cannot absolutely guarantee that his plan will be carried out through the voluntary choices of human agents. In this way, human voluntary action is not one of the ways in which God unilaterally guarantees that an event will occur. Thus, to this extent, God's providence is, relatively speaking, risky in regard to the voluntary decision making of human agents.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994). There are other relevant monographs on the openness model of divine action and providence. For example, see David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996); and William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989).

<sup>96</sup> See for example, John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

<sup>97</sup> For a recent critique of the open model of divine action, consult T. J. Mawson, "Divine Eternity," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 64 (2008): 35-50.

According to Tiessen, the redemptive intervention model mirrors the openness model, except with regard to foreknowledge. With complete knowledge of the future, God can act directly or indirectly to keep his plan of redemption moving. And it is only in the context of the history of redemption that God acts in extraordinary ways.

According to Tiessen, the church dominion model does not enjoy much scholarly discussion, but is found mostly in popular literature on providence and prayer.<sup>98</sup> Like the openness and redemptive intervention model, the church dominion model asserts that God limits himself. Tiessen writes, “Whereas the openness model emphasizes God’s self-restraint in giving his creatures libertarian freedom, the church dominion model argues that God’s primary purpose is to develop the administrative or ruling skills of the church.”<sup>99</sup> Proponents of this position see the traditional notion of divine action as fatalistic and, hence, dangerous because a fatalistic view of divine providence, they argue, leads to Christian apathy. God’s activity in the world, rather, is dependent on the activity of human agents.

Another position is the Molinist model which is usually associated with the Spanish Jesuit, Luis de Molina (1535-1600). This model is unique because of its theory of middle knowledge. Hasker defines middle knowledge as the following:

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<sup>98</sup> Tiessen cites examples of this model in the following scholars: Brother Andrew and Susan DeVore Williams, *And God Changed His Mind Because His People Prayed* (1990; reprint, London: Marshall Pickering, 1991); Nee To-Sheng (Watchman Nee), *What Shall This Man Do?* (London: Victory Press, 1961); and Paul Billheimer, *Destined to Overcome* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1982; reprint, Eastbourne, U. K.: Kingway, 1982), *Destined for the Throne* (London: Christian Literature Crusade, 1975).

<sup>99</sup> Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer*, 120.

The theory of middle knowledge holds that, for each possible free creature that might exist, and for each possible situation in which such a creature might make a free choice, there is a truth, known to God prior to and independent of any decision on God's part, concerning what definite choice that creature would freely make if placed in that situation.<sup>100</sup>

The theory of middle knowledge allows those who hold it to claim both that God controls everything that occurs and yet human agents still have a significant amount of libertarian freedom. For this reason, Molinism is a popular model. Flint identifies four logical moments of God's providential care within the Molinist account of divine action. The first moment is God's natural knowledge whereby he knows all necessary truths. The second moment is God's middle knowledge, whereby "he knows all contingent truths over which he has no control."<sup>101</sup> The third moment is God's creative act of will based on his necessary and middle knowledge. The fourth moment is God's free knowledge whereby he knows all contingent truths under his control.<sup>102</sup>

The final view is the Calvinist model of divine action. Obviously, this model is associated with Calvin and his followers, but there are some contemporary proponents of the Calvinist model, such as Helm, Feinberg, and White.<sup>103</sup> According to Tiessen, this

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<sup>100</sup> Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, 20.

<sup>101</sup> Flint, *Divine Providence*, 43.

<sup>102</sup> Flint, *Divine Providence*, 43.

<sup>103</sup> Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993); Vernon White, *The Fall of a Sparrow* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1985); John Feinberg, et al., *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, eds. David Basinger and Randall Basinger (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

model ultimately asserts that God is in complete unilateral control of the universe and in complete unilateral control of human voluntary action and hence qualifies as a *no risk* view of providence. Helm writes,

In the case of divine providence the events in question are all those which, in the history of the entire universe, are to become actual. We shall assume that if at least one of these events could be caused to turn out in a way other than the way that God believes that it will, then God is taking a risk.<sup>104</sup>

For Helm, this risk is unacceptable. God's providential control, at least for Helm, means that God must strongly bring about every earthly affair. According to Tiessen, this view of providence is so strong that even the free acts of human agents are brought about by divine action. Obviously, this position requires some form of compatibilism – the view that determinism and human free will are compatible. So this view constitutes a 'no risk' view of divine providence. And for this reason, according to Tiessen's version of the Calvinist model, God is always strongly involved in the actualization of earthly affairs; nothing surprises God, because he is in complete control of earthly affairs including the actions of voluntary agents.

However, the Calvinist model presented by Tiessen does not seem to be Calvin's view, nor is it clear that contemporary Reformed folk are obligated to hold this view. In fact, Tiessen's view of the Calvinist model resembles a theological fatalism. Steve Lemke writes,

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<sup>104</sup> Helm, *The Providence of God*, p. 40.

A fatalistic account describes history as an impersonal series of events, whereas traditional Christianity explains history as a series of events overseen and directed by a Person. Tiessen recognizes the value of a personalistic image of God (311), and an appropriate focus on the personalistic character of God is sufficient to free Calvinism of the allegation of impersonal fatalism.<sup>105</sup>

Calvin has a strong sense of human responsibility for sin that seems incompatible with the Calvinistic fatalism delivered by Tiessen. Also, not all Calvinists hold to the Calvin model as presented by Tiessen. There may be some who hold this model, but the Reformed tradition is rich with models of divine action that do not neatly fit into Tiessen's model. For example, Bruce Ware has recently argued for a view called compatibilist middle knowledge.<sup>106</sup> This is similar to Molinism mentioned above except that agents do not possess libertarian freedom in this view – they possess compatibilistic freedom. Tiessen agrees that compatibilistic middle knowledge is a live option for Calvinists.<sup>107</sup> Helm is not so sure. He writes,

Middle knowledge 'works' for the compatibilist, Ware says (GGG 115), but it only works because it is not genuine middle knowledge, a distinct type of divine knowledge, but part of God's natural knowledge. It works precisely because it is *not* middle knowledge. The examples that he cites from Scripture (GGG115-9) are of God's knowledge of unactualised possibilities, possibilities therefore that

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<sup>105</sup> Steve Lemke, "God's Relation to the World: Terrance Tiessen's Proposal on Providence and Prayer," *Criswell Theological Review* 1/2 (Spring 2004): 210.

<sup>106</sup> Bruce Ware, *God's Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, DL: Crossway, 2004), 110-130.

<sup>107</sup> Terrance Tiessen, "Why Calvinist Should Believe in Middle Knowledge, Although They Reject Molinism," *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 (2007): 345- 366. It should be noted though that Paul Helm specifically rejects this view, "Shunning Middle Knowledge," May 1, 2009 (<http://paulhelmsdeep.blogspot.com/2009/05/shunning-middle-knowledge.html>).



are counterfactual, but they are not counterfactuals of human (libertarian) freedom, and so are not middle knowledge at all. Ware can only be saying what he does because of an imperfect grasp of what the medieval theologians, and following them the Reformed and the Reformed Orthodox, have meant by God's necessary knowledge. I fear that what results is not so much middle knowledge as muddle knowledge.<sup>108</sup>

Helm thinks that middle knowledge presupposes some form of libertarian freedom. If theistic determinism and human freedom are compatible, then God's knowledge of human freedom belongs in God's natural knowledge and not in some 'middle' knowledge. Again, though, it is not clear that Calvinist must hold to some view of compatibilism – either a compatibilistic version of middle knowledge or Helm's theological determinism.<sup>109</sup>

### 5.3. Analysis and Evaluation of Tiessen's Approach

Tiessen's approach has merit. Not only does he address some of the problems associated with divine action, but Tiessen also tries to focus on conceptualizing divine action for the various positions. The conceptions of divine action that Tiessen outlines are not only drawn from contemporary scholars but are also drawn from Christian tradition. This approach enables one to see the variety of positions which are located on the spectrum of understanding divine action in the world, from minimal to maximal

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<sup>108</sup> Helm, "Shunning Middle Knowledge."

<sup>109</sup> Also see David Fergusson, "Divine Providence and Action," in *God's Life in Trinity*, eds. Miroslav Volf and Michael Welker (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006) 151-161. Fergusson argues that both the Thomist double causation model and the Calvinistic/Helm model of divine action are guilty of two things. First, both models do not adequately distinguishing between what God permits and what God does not permit. Second, both models do not provide an adequate view of human freedom (162).

amounts of divine involvement. This approach also avoids the mistake of merely examining and dealing with the *problems* of divine action, and thus it avoids the narrow approach that tends to abstract the idea of divine action from theological investigation. As Tiessen presents them, the Process, Openness, Barthian, and Thomist models are particularly sensitive to theological concerns.

Nonetheless, Tiessen's work has some problems. First, because he merely surveys models of divine action, Tiessen's presentation lacks desirable depth. He admits that his work is a survey and that he has selected only a few scholars to represent each model. But when he describes the semi-deistic model, for example, Tiessen primarily uses Wiles as the key representative. Therefore, Tiessen's survey of models falls to the same fate as most typologies. They tend to paint such a broad picture that important distinctives are lost. Thus, what Tiessen's work amounts to is a typology of models rather than a presentation of particular models. I suggest that formulating a particular model of divine action, one that addresses the concerns we have raised and also other theological concerns, would prove fruitful.

Another problem that looms in Tiessen's presentation is the focus on the extent or degree of divine involvement. The result is that the models which are presented tend to focus on the relation between divine and human action. Granted, the relation between divine and human action is an important issue in this debate, but there is more to understanding divine action than merely dealing with this aspect of the problem. Of course, Tiessen is merely reflecting the content of the current discussion, which does tend

to focus on this particular issue of divine and human action. However, as already mentioned, a few of the models (like the Barthian model) which he presents show promise in that they are sensitive to other theological concerns.

## **6. Conclusion**

This chapter examined contemporary discussions on the concept of divine action. The discussions focus on addressing problems associated with the notion that God acts, but fail to consider what God does and who God is as viable resources.

Sections 2 and 3 of this chapter presented the general landscape of literature on the topic of divine action. It was argued that the current discussion primarily deals with the problem of evil, creational autonomy, and the challenge of modern science. It was also noted that one scholar thinks that process theology has done more work to deal with these problems than any other position. Process thought provides analogies of God's activity, and it addresses the means, manner, effect, reason, and extent of divine action. It was also noted that other scholars lament the fact that more work is not done within a theological context. And so this section concluded by wondering if examining who God is and what God does could prove useful for making sense of the concept of divine action.

Section 4 introduced the reader to the concept of a model and to some assumptions that will be followed in this dissertation. It was pointed out that the goal of

this dissertation is to begin presenting a way of understanding God's activity in the world. That is, the dissertation is dealing with the question, "How could it be that God acts in the world?" It was also asserted that this dissertation will assume some basic propositions before developing a theology of divine action, namely, that (1) God exists, (2) God created the world, (3) the world exists, (4) God acts in the world, and (5) we can make meaningful claims about God's action in the world.

Section 5 briefly examined attempts to make sense of God's activity in the world as outlined by Tiessen. It was suggested that Tiessen's work shows promise because it attempts to conceptualize various views of divine action without necessarily focusing on the problems. However, the models he presents tend to focus on only one aspect of understanding divine action, that of extent. This focus is probably a product of the literature, which serves as more evidence that the conclusions in section 3 were accurate, namely, more time is spent *defending* the concept of divine action than *developing* concepts.

Finally, this chapter raised the possibility that there are other ways of making sense of the notion of divine action. Since the goal of recent scholarship has been to make sense of how it could be that God acts in the world, it was wondered if achieving this goal involves more than just responding to the *problems* of conceptualizing God's action. Furthermore, it was speculated that Christian scholars could be bolder than they are now in their attempts to state how it could be that God acts in the world. This boldness could be accomplished by addressing things that give rise to the concept of

divine action in the first place in order to help make sense of the divine action. Then, it was suggested that at least one worthwhile method is to determine what can be learned about divine action from what God does and who God is.

So there is work to be done here. It is suggested that one method is to examine a theologian, say, Brunner, and determine what sort of contribution his thought can make to the discussion. Perhaps not all of the issues and problems will be addressed by looking at Brunner's thought, but this method could prove fruitful nonetheless. The object would be to begin constructing a theological model of divine action that attempts to (1) address some of the problems we have identified and (2) to gain new insights and perspectives that have otherwise been neglected by considering the impact of what God does and who God is.

The next three chapters turn to the theology of Emil Brunner and determine his contribution to scholarship on the concept of divine action.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE NATURE OF GOD AND GOD'S ACTIVITY

#### 1. Introduction

How can we make sense of God's activity in the world? Chapter two presented various approaches by scholars who wrestle with this question. It was argued that contemporary discussions inadequately consider what God does and what God is like as possible resources for making sense of problems associated with the concept of God's activity. Instead, scholars offer abridged models of divine action that are designed to address specific problems. It was then suggested that theological investigation could help develop more thorough models of divine action that also address some of the key issues.

Chapter 3 takes the first step of making sense of God's activity. In this chapter, we take a look at the question, "How can the nature and attributes of God help make sense of God's activity in the world?" This chapter briefly introduces scholarship on Brunner, and then examines and analyzes his doctrine of God. It is argued that Brunner's thought on the nature of God helps make sense of God's activity in the world by explaining, in part, the effect, purpose, intention, and nature of God's activity.

This chapter will proceed by examining key scholarship on the nature of the divine agent. Then it will briefly examine scholarship on Brunner and provide some reasons for thinking that Brunner's thought makes a contribution to the notion of divine

action. After looking at the scholarship on Brunner, this chapter will then present some relevant concepts about the nature and attributes of God as articulated by Brunner from volume one of his *Dogmatics*. After this presentation, the chapter will begin to draw some implications from Brunner's contribution and state how thinking about the nature and attributes of God can help make sense of divine action. A concluding section will follow.

## **2. The Nature of the Divine Agent in Scholarship**

What is the relation between God's nature (i.e., who God is) and God's activity? Are there aspects of God's nature that cause conceptual problems for divine action? What does God's activity indicate about the nature of God? Can aspects of God's nature clarify aspects of God's activity? These are important questions to consider. This section begins to think about these issues by examining contemporary scholarship.

This section examines the following. First, this section examines Gwynne's claim about the state of scholarship on the nature of the divine agent. Second, this section considers works on the nature and attributes of God, and it is suggested that they rarely discuss the possible connection between God's nature and God's activity. Third, this section considers some scholarship that indicates a connection between God's nature and the concept of divine action.

To begin with, chapter 2 noted Gwynne's claim that that the contemporary discussion focuses on four key issues in the context of the nature of the divine agent: the immanence of God, the transcendence of God, God's faithfulness to creation's autonomy, and God's moral character. Although the last three issues pose apparent problems to the concept of divine action, God's immanence does not. Chapter 2 also discussed the views of Gordon Kaufman and Maurice Wiles in order to confirm that certain divine attributes such as transcendence and goodness can be problematic for making sense of divine action.<sup>1</sup> Making sense of God's activity seems linked to God's nature, but the problems, according to Gwynne, dominate the discussion. For a more complete discussion of these problematic attributes, examine chapter two of this dissertation.

Now, consider the following question: Are there more relevant attributes than Gwynne identifies? Gwynne names four attributes that arise in scholarly discourse on the nature of the divine agent. Yet, there could be other facets of God's nature that help clarify God's activity rather than cause conceptual problems.

Scholarship on God's nature is a possible resource for answering this question. However, although plenty of scholarship discusses the doctrine of God, little of it considers how (and if) God's nature contributes to our understanding of divine action.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Wiles, "Divine Action: Some Moral Considerations," in *The God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations*, ed. Thomas F. Tracy (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), *God's Action in the World* (London: SCM, 1986); Gordon D. Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 119-147.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Gerald J. Hughes, *The Nature of God* (New York: Routledge, 1995) indirectly discusses divine action in his section on divine omnipotence and goodness, but only as a way of talking about both attributes. For example, Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998) mentions divine action only



This is surprising because it seems obvious that as divine action contributes to our understanding of the divine attributes, divine attributes could also contribute to our understanding of divine action. That is, there may be a reciprocal relation between God's nature and activity. And, if so, then the relation should (at least in part) guide the discussion.

Consider the scholarship of both Gerald Hughes and Edward Wierenga, who examine traditional *loci* within the doctrine of God (e.g., omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness). Although God's nature is discussed, it is not discussed in the context of divine action, even though, at times, God's activity is implied. Consider Wierenga's discussion of divine omnipotence. Even when it makes sense to discuss the nature of God's activity, say, when examining divine omnipotence, little mention is made of the notion of divine action. To be fair, Wierenga does, however, discuss the impact of divine action on the divine attributes of immutability and eternity.<sup>3</sup> That is not to say that we should expect every treatment of God's nature to include a discussion on divine action. Nevertheless, given the probable connection between divine action and the nature of God, scholars should explore the implications of this relation.

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because it is essential for understanding the conflict between divine foreknowledge and human freedom. For an examination of the nature of God as personal and the correlation between a personal God and divine action see Vincent Brummer, *Speaking of a Personal God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), especially pages 108-127.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Wierenga, *The Nature of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 191-201. For an argument on how the concept of God's activity in the world affects our understanding of the nature of God, cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, "God Everlasting," in *God and the Good: Essays in Honor of Henry Stob*, eds. Clifton Orlebeke and Lewis S. Smedes (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975).

There are some scholars, though, who identify a connection between God's nature and God's activity. Frank Kirkpatrick argues that "if God *has acted*, and has acted in specific ways in accordance with God's overarching intention, then God's character will have to be understood as being whatever God has truly revealed it to be."<sup>4</sup> In fact, Kirkpatrick argues that "[o]nly through God's actions do we have any basis for inferring the character of God."<sup>5</sup> Thus, argues Kirkpatrick, the connection between God's activity and God's nature is inseparable. To suggest that an aspect of God's nature causes conceptual problems for divine action is to misunderstand the relation between God's activity and nature. Kirkpatrick writes,

Those who have objected to the notion of a 'finite' God, or a God who acts powerfully in history, have often charged that such actions turn God into either a tyrant or a 'big brother', a 'buddy-in-the-sky'. In either case, God becomes the personification (the anthropomorphization) of loathsome or infantile human traits. But again, the issue is not what God could be if God has the capacity to act, but what God has revealed Godself to be in fact.<sup>6</sup>

Kirkpatrick emphasizes God's activity in the world as a way to make sense of God's nature. Although it does not play a significant role in the scholarship, the notion that God's nature and activity are connected seems reasonable. However, it also seems

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<sup>4</sup> Frank G. Kirkpatrick, *Together Bound: God, History and the Religious Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 124. For more discussion on the impact of divine action on the divine attributes examine Kirkpatrick, *Together Bound*, especially pages 112-125. Kirkpatrick's monograph here is surprisingly overlooked. As far as I can tell, this work is not listed in any bibliography related to divine action, and, yet, it makes a significant contribution to understanding terms the history of the discussion and the relationship between the divine attributes and divine action.

<sup>5</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Together Bound*, 124.

<sup>6</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Together Bound*, 124.

reasonable that God's actual work in the world reveals something about the nature of that work and helps make sense of the concept of divine action.

But there are other ways to consider the nature of God's activity. Scholars such as William Alston and Thomas Tracy discuss some general ways within which to conceive of God's activity.<sup>7</sup> Alston's article, "How to Think about Divine Action," explores how to understand the divine agent. He argues that although God is a very different type of agent, concepts of human agency can aid in understanding God's agency. He also suggests that although our language on divine action will have a univocal core, it will include room for other types of language for understanding God's activity.

Like Alston, Tracy attempts to understand the nature of divine agency by thinking about human agency. He writes, "as with other agents, we will be able to give an account of *who* God is on the basis of what he does...[and]...insofar as God's actions fall under the informal criteria that govern the use of terms like 'loving,' 'just,' and 'wise,' these character trait predicates can be applied to him just as 'literally' as they are applied to persons."<sup>8</sup> That is, Tracy argues that knowledge of God can be meaningful only if claims

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<sup>7</sup> William Alston, "How to Think about Divine Action," in *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer*, eds. Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 51-70; Thomas F. Tracy, *God, Action, and Embodiment* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> Tracy, *God, Action, and Embodiment*, 152. This quote demonstrates a close connection between knowing God and God's activity. So, for example, in order to know God as love, we must experience God's love in our life or else be told by someone else about God's loving action.

about God's activity are meaningful. Thus, according to Tracy, making sense of God's nature depends, in part, on God's activity.

Evidence also supports the claim that there are other attributes worth considering in relation to divine action. For example, consider *Divine and Human Action*.<sup>9</sup> In this work, Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzmann have a different approach to making sense of God's activity. In their essay, "Being and Goodness," Stump and Kretzmann use Aquinas' concept of God as "being" and "goodness" in order to make sense of human and divine freedom. So again, not only is divine goodness a key attribute in the debate, but also God's being. Also, George Mavrodes, in "How Does God Know the Things He Knows," explores the concept of God's knowledge and how God's way of knowing things impacts the concept of the divine perfection and divine action. Furthermore, Vincent Brummer addresses the impact of God's love in making sense of God's activity.<sup>10</sup> And there are possibly other relevant divine attributes like simplicity, holiness, and lordship that help make sense of God's activity.

Also, the work of Clark Pinnock and John Sanders demonstrates that modifying one aspect of God's nature significantly impacts the concept of divine action. Both Pinnock and Sanders have recently published monographs that discuss the openness model of divine action.<sup>11</sup> In their work, both Pinnock and Sanders challenge some

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<sup>9</sup> *Divine and Human Action*, ed. Thomas V. Morris (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Vincent Brummer, *The Model of Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

traditional notions of God's nature, especially the model of God as sovereign, and present an alternative model, one in which God takes risks and desires human agents to enter into a loving relationship with God freely.<sup>12</sup>

Here is what we can conclude so far. First, although Gwynne's work helps make sense of the environment of discourse on divine action, there are other key issues that need to be explored. Second, some new trends point to the connection between God's nature and God's activity. The scholarship of Kirkpatrick, Tracy and Brummer reflects this trend. Although some scholarship addresses the relation between God's activity and God's nature, more should be done to explore this connection. However, before this chapter explores this link, scholarship on Brunner will now be surveyed.

### **3. Scholarship on Brunner's Theology**

This section examines the current state of affairs on Brunner scholarship. However, it will be evident that not much has been written on Brunner recently. In fact, Brunner's contribution to the topic of divine action does not appear in scholarship. This does not necessarily mean, of course, that Brunner does not address divine action, but that his contribution has possibly been overlooked. Nevertheless, this section will briefly comment on the recent scholarship, identify some main sources, briefly introduce the

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<sup>12</sup> Both Pinnock and Sanders would argue that God is sovereign, but their model of sovereignty is different from, say, the Calvinistic model. Sanders, for example, distinguishes between two different views of sovereignty: specific and general. For more on his discussion, cf. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 213-236.

thought of Emil Brunner, and identify the theological climate when Brunner was doing theology.

### 3.1. Introduction to Scholarship on Brunner

Scholarship on Brunner's thought has waned recently, leading some scholars to complain. Some suggest that both Barth and Bultmann have overshadowed Brunner. For example, Robert Bryant writes that because Brunner stands in the shadow of two legendary theologians, Brunner's theology "has been frequently misunderstood or ignored by the very people who presumably should have welcomed it."<sup>13</sup> Bryant reflects that because students were perhaps given the choice of following "either Barth or Bultmann" that the "mediating character" of Brunner's theology led to his thought being overlooked.<sup>14</sup>

John Hesselink makes a similar point about the influence of Brunner's thought. He suggests that, although many students of theology do not know much about Brunner today (the article was published in 1989), his thought was highly significant after World War II.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Hesselink points out that while he was in seminary, students were reading Brunner and not Barth. Among some of the works students read in seminary, according to Hesselink, were *The Mediator* (in Christology), *Man in Revolt* (in anthropology), *Revelation and Reason* (in prolegomena), and *The Divine Imperative* (in

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<sup>13</sup> Robert H. Bryant, "The Theology of Emil Brunner: Pro and Con," *Christian Century* 81 (January 15, 1964) 81.

<sup>14</sup> Bryant, "The Theology of Emil Brunner: Pro and Con," 81.

<sup>15</sup> I. John Hesselink, "Emil Brunner: A Centennial Perspective," *The Christian Century* 106 (December 1989), 1171.

ethics).<sup>16</sup> And Hesselink worries that even though a whole generation of students read Brunner in seminary, Brunner will be remembered “merely as one of several dialectical theologians, or as the one who debated Barth about natural theology.”<sup>17</sup> Despite his lament over the status of Brunner’s legacy, Hesselink hopes that because of Brunner’s “[k]ey concepts such as the personal nature of revelation and faith, truth as encounter, and the christocentric understanding of the church and ethics,” his influence will be felt for generations.<sup>18</sup>

However, despite Hesselink’s optimism with regard to the influence of Brunner, Mark McKim, in 1997, asks the question, “Whatever happened to Emil Brunner?”<sup>19</sup> That Brunner’s thought virtually disappeared from the theological enterprise surprises McKim. His astonishment seems warranted given the bibliography of Brunner’s work that McKim compiled.<sup>20</sup> Plus, according to McKim, Brunner was the first to introduce English readers to the movement known as ‘neo-orthodoxy.’ And, for McKim, Brunner’s writing was

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<sup>16</sup> Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1939); *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1946); *The Divine Imperative*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Mcmillan, 1937); *The Mediator*, trans. Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1937).

<sup>17</sup> Hesselink, “Emil Brunner: A Centennial Perspective,” 1174.

<sup>18</sup> Hesselink, “Emil Brunner: A Centennial Perspective,” 1174.

<sup>19</sup> Mark G. McKim, “Brunner the Ecumenist: Emil Brunner as a *Vox Media* of Protestant Theology,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 32 (1997): 91-104.

<sup>20</sup> Mark G. McKim, *Emil Brunner: A Bibliography*, in ATLA Bibliographies, no. 40 (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1996).

clearer than Barth's was. However, these factors do not add up to much recent scholarship on Brunner's thought.<sup>21</sup>

### 3.2. A Précis on Brunner's Theology

Brunner's thought has received some attention, though.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps one of the high points of scholarship on Brunner was the publication of *The Theology of Emil Brunner* (1962).<sup>23</sup> In this monograph, theologians such as Anders Nygren, Reidar Hauge, Paul Tillich, and Edward Dowey have written essays that both interpret and criticize Brunner's thought. In addition, McKim's recent work attempts both to understand and determine the contemporary relevance of Brunner's theology. This section will now consider some of this scholarship in turn.

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<sup>21</sup> There are a few recent dissertations on Brunner but not many. For example, see Stephen Carlton Andersen, "Theological anthropology and Christian social ethics: The Imago Dei as relational ontology in the political thought of Emil Brunner and Douglas John Hall" (Ph.D. diss., Luther Seminary, 2001); John Woodward Hart, "Karl Barth versus Emil Brunner: The formation and dissolution of a theological alliance" (D. Phil. diss., University of Oxford, 1994); Mark G. McKim, "A Study of Emil Brunner's Criticism of Lutheran and Reformed Concepts of Faith" (Th.D. diss., Boston University School of Theology, 1993); and Gordon W. Johnson, "Soteriology as a Function of Epistemology in the Thought of Emil Brunner" (Ph.D. diss., Rice University, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> For a good introduction to Brunner's theology, cf. J. Edward Humphrey's, *Emil Brunner* (Waco: Word Books, 1976). For more on Brunner's thought on creation, ethics, and eschatology, cf. Douglas J. Schuurman, *Creation, Eschaton, and Ethics: The Ethical Significance of the Creation-Eschaton Relation in the Thought of Emil Brunner and Jürgen Moltman* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991). For Brunner's apologetic theology, cf. Paul G. Schrotenboer, *New Apologetics: An Analysis and Appraisal of the Eristic Theology of Emil Brunner* (Kampen, Netherlands: J. H. Kok, 1955) and his "Emil Brunner," in *Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology*, ed. Philip Edgecumbe Hughes (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955), 99-130. In addition, I have already mentioned *The Theology of Emil Brunner*, eds. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall which contains various essays on not only Brunner's foundational thought but also on his doctrine of God, ecclesiology, soteriology, and apologetics. For more works on Brunner, consult McKim's, *Emil Brunner: A Bibliography*, which lists 198 secondary sources.

<sup>23</sup> *The Theology of Emil Brunner*, eds. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1962).



McKim provides a helpful introduction to Brunner's theology. McKim claims that the Reformed tradition, pastoral experience, the religious socialist movement, and "the small circle of theologians loosely centered around Karl Barth" have influenced Brunner's thought.<sup>24</sup> He also claims that much of Brunner's thought focused on prolegomena issues including the following five major themes: the nature of truth, the nature of faith, the relation between revelation and reason, natural theology, and Christology. Each of these themes will now be considered in turn.

First, McKim claims that much of Brunner's theology focuses on the nature of truth. McKim writes, "Brunner contended that truth in the biblical sense was always 'truth as encounter.' Truth, in Scripture, was always God's encounter of a human being. This truth always, in some fashion, changed the recipient of that truth."<sup>25</sup> Defining truth in this manner influenced Brunner's rejection of the "subject-object thesis" of truth. Thus, theology should not be subjected to "a dichotomy dividing truth into subjective and objective spheres."<sup>26</sup> That is, God is not a controllable object, and truth is not merely inward.

Hauge also finds that "truth as encounter" is a major theme and governs much of Brunner's thought. "Truth as encounter," according to Hauge, refers to the claim that

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<sup>24</sup> McKim, "An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Emil Brunner," in *Emil Brunner: A Bibliography*, 9-10.

<sup>25</sup> McKim, "An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Emil Brunner," 14.

<sup>26</sup> McKim, "An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Emil Brunner," 13.

Christ is the norm for dogmatics and biblical investigation.<sup>27</sup> This concept, for example, influences Brunner's doctrine of God. Hauge writes, "Brunner breaks with the old metaphysics of being...[and] [i]nstead he emphasizes that God is the Lord who claims us for Himself...[and] He is love in that He wills to have communion with us."<sup>28</sup> The influence of the concept of "truth as encounter" also influences Brunner's Christology which is demonstrated by examining the work of Christ before the person of Christ.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps the presence of "truth as encounter" in Brunner's thought leads Nygren to argue that Brunner's theology is anti-speculative. Nygren writes that "Brunner has accomplished the magnificent work of freeing the doctrine of God and dogmatics from the fetters of Platonic and Neoplatonic speculation."<sup>30</sup>

However, argues Nygren, Brunner's thought still contains at least one type of speculation, namely, Martin Buber's I-Thou philosophy. This philosophy heavily influences Brunner's thought on revelation. Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson assert,

Brunner asserted that any theology that treats knowledge of God as analogous to knowledge of objects (for example, distant planets or subatomic particles) is fundamentally wrong-headed. The very essence of Christianity lies in the eventfulness of encounter between God and humanity. Knowledge of God is personal in the sense that it transcends the plane of objects and the subject-object

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<sup>27</sup> Reidar Hauge, "Truth as Encounter," in *The Theology of Emil Brunner*, 145.

<sup>28</sup> Hauge, "Truth as Encounter," 145.

<sup>29</sup> Hauge, "Truth as Encounter," 146.

<sup>30</sup> Anders Nygren, "Emil Brunner's Doctrine of God," in *The Theology of Emil Brunner*, 186.

dualism inherent in knowledge of objects, calling instead for personal decision, response and commitment.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, God does not reveal mere *knowledge* about himself – God reveals himself. That revelation is centered on the personal encounter with God through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, then, is the infallible Word of God. Christianity is by definition an encounter with Jesus Christ. The encounter with Christ is the way we experience God's activity in the world. We may read about God's encounter in the Bible. But Christian faith is grounded in God's interpersonal communication of himself through Jesus Christ.<sup>32</sup>

Second, in addition to the nature of truth, the nature of faith is a major theme in Brunner's thought. According to McKim, Brunner argued that faith should be "understood in personal terms, as a relationship of trusting obedience...to God in Jesus Christ."<sup>33</sup> Doctrine, for Brunner, always points to Jesus Christ as the proper object of faith, and, thus, faith is not an assent to orthodoxy but to Jesus.

Dowey also writes on the personal nature of faith in Brunner's thought.<sup>34</sup> According to Dowey, evidence of personalism can be found in Brunner's constant use of

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<sup>31</sup> Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *Twentieth Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992) 81.

<sup>32</sup> For a thorough discussion of Brunner's concept of revelation and reason, see Eugene Paul Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1959).

<sup>33</sup> McKim, "An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Emil Brunner," 16.

<sup>34</sup> Edward A. Dowey, Jr., "Redeemer and Redeemed as Persons in History," in *The Theology of Emil Brunner*, 189-204.

terms like “person, decision, act, community, conversation, history, I-Thou, encounter, and once-for-all.”<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, Dowey argues that Brunner’s main hermeneutic principle has to do with the idea of truth as “an act of personal encounter of the believer with God in Christ.”<sup>36</sup> In fact, Brunner understands history as a “personal encounter,” and, argues Dowey, “personal encounter” is a driving force behind Brunner’s theology.<sup>37</sup>

Third, revelation and reason is also a major theme in Brunner’s thought. McKim writes, “God, argued Brunner, has provided a general revelation, which though it is not salvific, is quite sufficient to show humanity its sinfulness, make it culpable, and demonstrate something of God’s majesty.”<sup>38</sup> In addition, the Bible and the Holy Spirit are the most important witnesses to Jesus Christ. And, argued Brunner, along with reason, both the Bible and the Holy Spirit are valid ways of knowledge. Revelation provides personal and saving knowledge, whereas reason provides knowledge of impersonal objects.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Dowey, “Redeemer and Redeemed as Persons in History,” 190.

<sup>36</sup> Dowey, “Redeemer and Redeemed as Persons in History,” 191. Dowey adds that, according to Brunner, “[The] conception of biblical authority excludes propositional truth, scientific statements about the natural world, and certain legendary and mythical materials found in the Bible (the virgin birth and the empty tomb qualify on all four counts), not finally on historico-critical grounds, but because they are extraneous to Encounter” (p. 191).

<sup>37</sup> Dowey, “Redeemer and Redeemed as Persons in History,” 192.

<sup>38</sup> McKim, “An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Emil Brunner,” 16.

<sup>39</sup> McKim, “An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Emil Brunner,” 17.

Tillich also addresses Brunner's epistemology.<sup>40</sup> According to Tillich, the concept of faith unlocks Brunner's theory of knowledge. Tillich writes, Brunner calls faith "the 'obedience-in-trust' toward the Word of God, identifying the Word with the Biblical message, but not with the letters of the Bible."<sup>41</sup> By defining faith in this manner, Tillich suggests that Brunner removes "objectivism" from faith. Thus, faith has to do with a response to knowledge received by an encounter with God and not a response to knowledge of dogma or objective claims in scripture.<sup>42</sup>

Fourth, natural theology is another key theme in Brunner's thought. According to McKim, Brunner argued that something of God can be known outside of special revelation.<sup>43</sup> Brunner gave two reasons for this view. First, Brunner argued that a natural theology was essential for the contention that humanity was responsible for failing to respond to God. Second, Brunner argued that just as one can know something of an artist by her work, so humanity can know something of God because of God's work.<sup>44</sup> Natural knowledge of God is not salvific, but it is still knowledge, and it is enough knowledge to render humanity responsible for rejecting God.

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Tillich, "Some Questions on Brunner's Epistemology," in *The Theology of Emil Brunner*, 99-107.

<sup>41</sup> Tillich, "Some Questions on Brunner's Epistemology," 101.

<sup>42</sup> Tillich, "Some Questions on Brunner's Epistemology," 102.

<sup>43</sup> McKim, "An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Emil Brunner," 18.

<sup>44</sup> McKim, "An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Emil Brunner," 18.

Finally, Brunner's theology was also christocentric. McKim writes, "Behind Brunner's conviction that Christian theology had to be christocentric was the belief that God was made known to humanity most clearly in Christ."<sup>45</sup> Brunner believed that we know the person of Christ based on what Christ did, and, for this reason, Brunner begins his Christology with the work of Christ instead of the person of Christ.<sup>46</sup> And central to his thought on Christology was the notion that Jesus is the message himself. For Brunner, this idea distinguishes Christ from a mere prophet who claims to bring God's word. Jesus, on the other hand, is God's word.<sup>47</sup>

### 3.3. Brunner in Context

As mentioned above, McKim claims that Brunner focuses on prolegomena issues because of the failure of liberal theology.<sup>48</sup> Paul Jewett makes a similar claim by suggesting that the reason for Brunner's focus on foundational issues is an attempt to answer the following problem: "How does one ground Christian faith in an historical revelation in such a way as to avoid the relatives [*sic*] of history?"<sup>49</sup> Jewett argues that Brunner and many of his contemporaries believed that liberal theology failed to

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<sup>45</sup> McKim, "An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Emil Brunner," 21.

<sup>46</sup> McKim, "An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Emil Brunner," 21.

<sup>47</sup> McKim, "An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Emil Brunner," 23.

<sup>48</sup> McKim, "An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Emil Brunner," 13.

<sup>49</sup> Paul K. Jewett, *Emil Brunner: An Introduction to the Man and His Thought* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1961), 19. Also, cf. Paul K. Jewett, *Emil Brunner's Concept of Revelation* (London: James Clarke & Co. LTD., 1954); Joseph J. Smith, *Emil Brunner's Theology of Revelation* (Ateneo De Manila University: Loyola House of Studies, 1967).

adequately address this problem. Brunner's thought, then, could be understood as an attempt to address the inadequacies of liberal theology.

According to Gilkey, prolegomena is not the only problematic issue in modern theology. He argues that much theological reflection in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is an attempt to respond to the modern scientific claim that God does not (and perhaps cannot) intervene in the natural-historical causal nexus. Gilkey writes, "the new consciousness of history arose as a challenge not only to older conceptions of changeless, absolute and sacred structures of history, but also as a challenge to the notion of divine providence determinative of the events of history."<sup>50</sup> Gilkey then outlines the liberalism of Schleiermacher, the neo-orthodoxy of Bultmann and Barth, and the eschatological theology of theologians like Pannenberg and Moltmann as modern responses to the challenge.<sup>51</sup> Like Gilkey, Kirkpatrick put the problem in this way:

Contemporary theology simply accepted without question the essential premises of metaphysical dualism, namely, that God...was 'in' a radically other ontological context and could not be made to connect...with our ontological context without violation of the very principles of scientific understanding and historical explanation by which our context was metaphysically represented.<sup>52</sup>

That is, the modern assumption is that we cannot make sense of divine action without suspending our modern assumptions about the natural, scientifically understood world.

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<sup>50</sup> Langdon Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 209.

<sup>51</sup> Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind*, 210-226

<sup>52</sup> Frank Kirkpatrick, *Together Bound*, 83.

Much of modern theology, then, wrestles with reconciling the concept of divine action with many modern assumptions about the world.

Scholarship has not located Brunner's response to this problem. Brunner was certainly active in the theological enterprise when the issue of divine action became pressing. Plus, his prolegomena, at least in part, looks like an attempt to meet the challenge that modernity presents to the concept of divine action by focusing on the concept of "encounter." Because of this, one would expect scholars to mention Brunner's contribution to the field of divine action. However, not much has been written on Brunner's contribution even though there appears to be some evidence that he addressed this issue.

For example, Jewett hints that Brunner responds to the problem of divine action.

He writes,

...Brunner seeks a way out of the either-or of liberalism and orthodoxy. He is neither liberal nor orthodox, but neo-orthodox. He discovers his clue in defining revelation, not as a book of infallible propositions in human words, but as God himself, entering into history in the person of Jesus Christ to perform once for all the decisive act of all history.<sup>53</sup>

That is, according to Brunner, faith in God is not mere assent to objective biblical claims, but faith is a response to God who encounters us and redeems us.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Jewett, *Emil Brunner*, 20.

<sup>54</sup> Emil Brunner, *Our Faith*, trans. John W. Rilling (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), 1-2. Brunner appears to understand "objective" in the sense that biblical claims are not claims about objects of knowledge, that is, like a scientific text book might make claims about an object, say, a flower or mountain range.



Although Brunner suggests that speaking of God's activity as a personal encounter with God (especially an encounter with Jesus Christ) helps us understand the means of divine action, it is also possible that he presents theology in a way that allows him to make other claims about God's activity. This is the subject of the rest of the dissertation. For now, Brunner's contribution to the nature of the divine agent will be considered.

#### **4. Theological Contribution of Brunner**

This section will look at the theological contribution of Brunner on the discussion of the nature of the divine agent. It is being suggested that Brunner has a strong sense of God's activity in the world, and that Brunner's discussion of the nature and attributes of God helps make sense of God's activity. This section will proceed by examining and analyzing Brunner's discussion of the doctrine of God.

Before looking at various aspects of God's nature, it should be noted that Brunner makes a distinction between God's nature and God's attributes. For Brunner, God's nature has to do with things that are essential to God, independent of God's relation to creation. That is, according to Brunner, attributes that properly belong to God's nature could not have been otherwise no matter how things could have been different. Brunner's discussion of God's attributes has to do with qualities that God has in relation to creation. The distinction Brunner makes between God's nature and attributes is not

crucial to our discussion, but it is worth mentioning from the beginning.

Furthermore, this is not a defense of Brunner's doctrine of God. The point of this examination and evaluation is to determine whether Brunner's thought on God's nature can help make sense of divine action. If so, then scholarship should pursue the value of the connection between God's nature and activity. With that said, we will now examine the divine nature and attributes as presented by Brunner.

#### 4.1. Brunner: The Nature of God

Brunner discusses the nature of God under five main characteristics: God's name, lordship, holiness, love, and tri-unity. According to Brunner, all five of these characteristics constitute God as he is in himself, namely, the nature of God apart from his relationship to creation.<sup>55</sup> This section will briefly examine Brunner's discussion of the nature of God, and then it will add some final conclusions before moving on to the next section on the attributes of God.

##### 4.1.1. The Name of God

Brunner puts much emphasis on God's name because, according to him, the divine name plays a large role in scripture. He writes, "high significance is ascribed to the idea of the 'Name of God' within the Biblical revelation because it gathers up, in a simple way which everybody can understand, certain decisive elements in the reality of

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<sup>55</sup> In Brunner's thought, things attributed to God's nature are probably not intended to be exhaustive. There may be other coherent and compatible attributes of God that are relevant for making sense of divine action. However, it is the purpose of this dissertation to restrict the scope of inquiry to Brunner's theology.

revelation...”<sup>56</sup> That is, for Brunner, God’s name reveals certain elements about the nature of God’s revelation. These elements can be summed up in Brunner’s assertion that God is a ‘Thou’ and not an ‘It.’ That is, God is personal.

Brunner also claims that God’s name reveals something about the nature of God and God’s activity. Brunner writes, “The ‘Name’ of God covers both the revealed Nature of God and His revealing action; the foundation of this revelation in Being and in Act is the Divine will to sovereignty and communion, the purpose of which is the glory of God and communion with God.”<sup>57</sup> This passage seems to connect God’s nature and God’s activity. But it also indicates that God’s name reveals something about what God is like and what God’s activity is like. This passage also indicates that, for Brunner, God’s sovereignty and desire to have communion explains God’s nature and activity, and that the purpose of this activity can ultimately be explained in God’s glory and God’s desire for creation to have communion with him.

Brunner also claims that the concept of God’s name is essential for making sense of the doctrine of God. Brunner writes, “Thus the Biblical conception of the ‘Name’, and the ‘manifestation of the name’, contains the meaning of the whole Biblical doctrine of God.”<sup>58</sup> Thus, the name of God, according to Brunner, is crucial for making sense of

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<sup>56</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 120.

<sup>57</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 120.

<sup>58</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 120.

God's nature, and it also seems to suggest something with regard to God's activity, or, as Brunner would put it, God's "revealing action."

Brunner adds three other key notions about the name of God and then discusses the danger of anthropomorphism. First, God's name (i.e., I AM THAT I AM) implies that God is mysterious or incomparable because God cannot be entirely circumscribed or defined.<sup>59</sup> Second, God's name suggests that God is personal and not impersonal. He writes,

The 'Thou' is something other than the 'Not-I'; the 'Not-I' is the world, the sum-total of objects. But the 'Thou' is that 'Not-I' which is an 'I' (or a Self) as I am myself, of which I only become aware when it is not thought by my own efforts, or perceived as an object, but when it makes itself known to me as self-active, self-speaking, as 'I-over-against-me.'<sup>60</sup>

Thus, God's name is evidence that God acts, speaks, and reveals himself to us. From this, Brunner infers that God is a personal God. Third, the name of God is an indication that God has established communion with creation. He writes, "[T]he communication of a name is the disclosure of one's self to the other, and thus the establishment—or at least the beginning—of a personal relation and communion."<sup>61</sup> There is also a connection between the establishment of a personal relationship by the creator with creatures and the work of Jesus Christ. Brunner writes, "When Yahweh manifests His Name He makes the

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<sup>59</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 121.

<sup>60</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 122. This passage is also evidence that Brunner has been influenced by Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1937).

<sup>61</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 123.

Covenant with Israel; when Jesus in His own Person makes known fully and finally the personal mystery of God, He establishes communion between the Holy God and sinful man.”<sup>62</sup> Brunner then warns the reader about the dangers of anthropomorphism, namely, reducing God’s nature to mere human nature. Brunner, however, counters by suggesting that it is God who has come “down to our level.”<sup>63</sup>

Even in the beginning of his doctrine of God, Brunner’s thought on God’s name contributes to discourse on divine action. First, Brunner identifies a relation between God’s nature and God’s activity. Although the relation is not explained, Brunner does identify a connection. Second, the name of God reveals something about the nature of God’s activity. Namely, God’s name (or the revelation of God’s name) indicates that God’s activity is characterized by the notion that God is personal and sovereign. That is, God’s actions are deliberate, revealing, and effective. And God’s name (or the revelation of God’s name) indicates part of God’s purpose in acting. Namely, God desires to have communion with his creation. Third, Brunner also desires to maintain some mystery in God’s nature and activity. Namely, he claims that although we can know some things about God, God is still mysterious.

#### 4.1.2. God as Lord

Brunner continues to emphasize the theme that God is personal in his chapter on God as Lord by contrasting the personal Yahweh with the impersonal Baalim of the Old

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<sup>62</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 124.

<sup>63</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 126.

Testament. The main claim by Brunner in this section is that God is not *involved* in the course of nature as one of many parts, but rather, as Lord, God *intervenes* in nature, and, thus, God demonstrates that he is Lord over creation and that his involvement with creation is intentional and hence personal. This section will now consider Brunner's thought on God as Lord.

Brunner argues that God is not merely connected to the course of nature like other natural things, but, in contrast to the Baalim, God stands above nature and voluntarily enters into a relationship with humanity. Brunner writes,

This 'Lord' was distinguished from all the Baalim of the surrounding countries by the very fact that He, in His self-originating action, as the One who was not involved in the course of Nature, but Himself was Lord, had mightily intervened in History. In this historical revelation He showed Himself from the outset as One who was quite different from the Baalim, who were essentially connected with the course of Nature. Yahweh is the One who was not 'there' already, who was not connected with that which was already given, but the One who elected freely, who Himself established man's relationship with God, who showed Himself in His action in history, and in His self-revelation, as the Lord over all that is 'given' and 'natural.'<sup>64</sup>

For Brunner, God's intervening action in history indicates that God is Lord over creation, and, again, that the purpose of God's intervention is connected to the claim that God desires to have a relationship with humanity.

Brunner also recognizes the relation between God's nature and God's activity in the context of God as Lord. He writes, "From His nature which manifested itself more and more in the historical character of His revelation, increasingly His uniqueness, and

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<sup>64</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 138.

His sovereignty over the whole of nature, His Creative Power, became known.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, knowledge of God is possible because of God’s revealing activity.

As a result of God’s continuous activity, the designation Yahweh was no longer necessary to distinguish God from the impersonal Baalim. He writes, “Once this had taken place, then His proper name became merely a sign which could finally disappear and, without any danger of confusion with the Baalim, could be replaced by the title ‘Lord’.”<sup>66</sup> Brunner then concludes that God is a subject. He writes,

The God with whom we have to do in faith, is not a Being who has been discussed or ‘conceived’ (by man); He is not an *Ens*, a ‘substance’, like the Godhead of metaphysical speculation; He is not an object of thought—even though in a sublimated and abstract form—but the Subject who as ‘I’ addresses us as ‘thou’. God is the Personality who speaks, acts, disclosing to us Himself and His will.<sup>67</sup>

Thus, for Brunner, as God is Lord, so God is ‘personal’ (as opposed to impersonal). The personal nature of God is evident not only in God’s activity, but in God’s Lordship over creation which is demonstrated by his activity. And, again, a key focus of Brunner’s thought on God’s activity appears to be God’s desire to enter into a personal relationship with humanity because his activity is directed toward humanity.

Brunner also examines concepts that are traditionally associated with the Lordship of God: God’s aseity and Absoluteness, and God as *actus purus* and *prima causa*. He

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<sup>65</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 138.

<sup>66</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 138.

<sup>67</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 139.

argues that although some of these ideas are allowable, they must not be incompatible with the understanding of God as personal. He writes,

In so far as God also suffers in the sense of ‘suffering with’ (sympathy); reacts—in the sense of hearing prayer; is ‘thoughtful’ for man—and thus is conditioned in His action, this receptivity springs wholly out of His free willing and positing, out of the fact that He makes Himself finite, condescends to us in free self-limitation, which is based wholly in Himself, in His freedom.<sup>68</sup>

In other words, where God is not voluntarily passive, God can be considered as pure act. However, even when God is rightly conceived as ‘pure act,’ Brunner warns that this and other terms like it (e.g., absoluteness and aseity) imply impersonal metaphors. It is only when God is understood as personal that we properly conceive of God as an “unconditional freedom, unlimited vitality, unlimited independence, purely positing, originally creative Power.”<sup>69</sup>

The highest manifestation of God as Lord, according to Brunner, occurs when God redeems the sinner and not in God’s demand for our obedience. He writes,

Hence the revelation of God as Lord is not fully completed in the prophetic revelation; it is only fulfilled where God, as the generous Giver, in His own Person intervenes in the distorted relation of man with Him, where He, who has royal claims, in royal sovereignty takes the part of the accused, and sets him free from the guilt which separates him, the sinner, from the Creator.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 145.

<sup>69</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 145.

<sup>70</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 148.



The proof of God's lordship over creation, for Brunner, comes in his redemption of creation, not his control over it, not in his claim over it, but rather in his redeeming intervention. Thus, Brunner focuses on God's activity in creation, specifically God's redeeming activity, in order to illustrate God's lordship. In fact, according to Brunner, it appears as though we know that God is Lord because God demonstrates his lordship through redemption. And yet, at the same time, God's royal claim over creation, that is, God's lordship, accounts for God's ability to act in redeeming ways.

Finally, Brunner critiques other approaches to God's lordship which suggest that the highest manifestation of that concept is God's sovereignty and aseity and not the work of Jesus Christ. For Brunner, God's ability (which stems from his lordship) and willingness (which stems from his love for and desire to have communion with creation) to redeem sinners is rooted in the biblical testimony. And the ultimate manifestation of God's lordship comes in the person of Jesus Christ. He writes, "He [Jesus] is the kurios because in Him God exercises His sovereignty in His revealed presence, not merely any longer vicariously and indirectly and immediately through Him who Himself has royal authority, and can say in His own Person: 'I, I am the Lord.' 'I therefore say unto you...'"<sup>71</sup> For Brunner, the lordship of God is rooted in Jesus Christ and God's redemptive activity and not in the being of God.

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<sup>71</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 148-149.

Brunner's thought on God as Lord contributes to discourse on divine action.

Brunner identifies a connection between God's nature and God's activity that needs to be explored. Namely, implicit in Brunner's thought of God as Lord is that God acts, and the highest manifestation of God's lordship is God's redemptive activity. And yet, at the same time, God's royal claim over creation, that is, God's lordship, accounts for God's ability to act in redeeming ways. God's activity in the world seems to be implicit in the concept of God's lordship. Brunner does argue that God's redemptive activity infers that God is personal because his activity is directed toward humanity. Thus, Brunner claims that generic notions of God as Lord (e.g., *actus purus* and *prima causa*) are inappropriate without the notion that God is a subject. Although Brunner does not address the issue further, his main contribution lies in the claim that there is a reciprocal connection between God's redemptive activity, God as sovereign and lord, and the nature of God's activity.

#### 4.1.3. God as Holy

One of the most vexing issues for divine action has been the concept of God as transcendent. Christians have traditionally maintained the following two propositions:

(1) God acts in the world,

and

(2) God is transcendent.

The argument is not that these two propositions are logically incompatible with each other. These two propositions, rather, present a challenge. The challenge might be

conceived as follows: If God is wholly other, then how can we properly conceive of God's activity in the world? So while there is no obvious truth in one that rules out the other (e.g., 'God acts in the world' and 'God does not act in the world'), there is some uneasiness with these two propositions.

Brunner's discussion on the holiness of God is helpful because he identifies the concept of God's holiness with God's transcendence. And holiness, for Brunner, implies certain activities of God that will be explained in turn.

The holiness of God, according to Brunner, sets God apart from creation, but this does not entail that God is impersonal. God is a completely different being because God alone is holy. Holiness, Brunner writes, "distinguishes [God] clearly and absolutely from everything else."<sup>72</sup> However, as before, Brunner warns that this idea of God's holiness and transcendence should not be at the expense of God's personal nature. Brunner thinks that the idea of transcendence could (wrongly) conceptualize God as impersonal in character. He writes,

Only He who, in the strict sense of the word, is the Lord of the world, the Creator, can be 'wholly Other'. Only the Creator Lord, by His very nature, is different from all other existence, in such a radical and absolute manner as indeed only Creator and creature can be different. The Creator has no trace of 'the world' or of 'the creaturely' in Himself, and conversely, the creature as such has no trace of 'non-creatureliness', of 'divinity', and therefore of 'holiness.'<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 158.

<sup>73</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 158-159.

And as we have already seen, according to Brunner, the very idea of God's lordship implies that God is a subject or personal in nature and not merely an object or impersonal. God's lordship indicates that God stands over creation and yet has a claim on creation. God demonstrates his lordship, not merely by controlling creation, but more importantly by being able and willing to redeem it.

Brunner also discusses the relation between God's holiness and divine action by suggesting that God is actively engaged in protecting his holiness. He writes,

The Being of God which His Name makes known to us can never be grasped by neutral categories of existence. He is Will. Thus the concept of 'the Holy' contains the element of Will, and precisely that Will which is set upon proclaiming Himself as the 'Wholly other'. The border-line which separates the Nature of God from all other forms of existence, from that which has been created, is not only a frontier line, it is a *closed* frontier, symbolized by the 'mount... which burned with fire.' God makes this border line: He actively maintains it, defends it against every infringement on the part of the arrogant creature. God *wills* to be the Only One who is what He is. He 'will not give His honour to another'. Hence the idea of 'Holiness' is closely connected with that idea of 'jealousy' which modern man finds so repellent.<sup>74</sup>

From this passage, it is clear that Brunner refuses to think of God's holiness as independent of other divine attributes. More precisely, Brunner attaches the concept of divine will to divine holiness and argues that God does not transcend the cosmos in the sense of withdrawing, but that God actively protects his holiness. Thus, implicit in God's holiness is God's activity.

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<sup>74</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 159-160.

The idea that God's activity is implicit in God's holiness can be seen in the following passage. Brunner writes,

[God] rejects every attack on His sole rights, on that which belongs to Him alone. The Holiness of God is therefore not only an absolute difference of nature, but it is an active self-differentiation, the willed energy with which God asserts and maintains the fact that He is Wholly Other against else. The absoluteness of this difference becomes the absoluteness of His holy will, which is supreme and unique.<sup>75</sup>

One of the most striking ideas in this passage is that instead of seeing God's holiness or transcendence as problematic for the concept of divine action, for Brunner the concept of God's transcendence implies that God asserts and maintains his holiness. For Brunner, God actively maintains his transcendence with acts of wrath and glory.

Brunner then contrasts the holiness or transcendence of God with that of Zeus. He asserts that Zeus is indifferent. Zeus does not care if humanity recognizes him or not. By contrast, God is not indifferent. He desires the whole world to be filled with his glory. He wants all of humanity to know his name. What follows is a lengthy passage that shows the thrust of Brunner's thought. He writes,

He is not a static Being, but the God of revelation, who indeed reveals Himself precisely because He wills that His name should be made known, in order that He may be glorified, in order that His will should be done. The Holy Name and the Glory of God are inseparable. As the God of revelation He is the God who cares absolutely, to whom it is not a matter of indifference whether the creature does His will, or his own will, whether falsehood or His Truth prevail in the world of men, whether people worship other gods beside Him, or whether they render obedience to other lords. It concerns Him—'it matters' to Him. And indeed it

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<sup>75</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 160.

matters to Him that He should be recognized as the Holy One, as the One who is Wholly Other.<sup>76</sup>

As asserted above, some scholars suggest that God's transcendence is problematic for understanding and articulating divine action. By contrast, Brunner suggests that God's activity is rooted in his desire to be known, glorified, and obeyed. Holiness motivates God to reveal himself and to act, to desire communion, to redeem his people so that they can have fellowship with him.

Brunner also recognizes some tension within God's holiness. He suggests that there is a twofold movement of God's will. On the one hand, God's holiness leads to God's withdrawal from creation. On the other hand, God's holiness leads God to expand his glory throughout creation and to include creation within that glory. He writes, "From all that has just been said it is plain that in the concept of the Holiness of God there is a twofold movement of the Divine Will—at first sight a contradictory movement, namely, a movement of withdrawal and exclusion, and a movement of expansion and inclusion."<sup>77</sup> This twofold movement is analogous to God's name. On the one hand, God's name is ineffable and cannot be circumscribed. On the other hand, the revelation of God's name demonstrates that God is personal and desires communion with his people.

Furthermore, according to Brunner, God makes himself known to the creature because God cares deeply for the creature. Brunner does not claim that God's 'otherness'

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<sup>76</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 161.

<sup>77</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 162.

prevents God from caring for creation, but rather argues that in spite of God's 'otherness', God still cares for the creature. He writes, "God does not ignore the will of His creature; He cares intensely for His creature, He wills, infinitely seriously, to be known by this creature as that which He is. In infinitely divine passion He is Will turned towards man..."<sup>78</sup>

At times Brunner seems to equate the holiness of God with God's transcendence, but he does make independent claims about God's transcendence. For the purpose of our discussion, the most relevant portion of Brunner's thought here is his distinction between God's transcendence of essence and transcendence of being. He writes, "Transcendence of essence means that God is God alone, and that His 'Godhood' is absolutely and irrevocable different from all other forms of being, as the essence of the Creator differs from the essence of the creature."<sup>79</sup> According to Brunner, the divine characteristic of transcendence differentiates God from creatures.

Again, for Brunner, God's nature and activity are connected. The holiness of God implies that God acts. On the one hand, God retreats from creation. On the other hand, God's holiness and transcendence seem to imply, for Brunner, that God's activity is rooted in his desire to be known, glorified, and obeyed, which is not only consistent with God's holiness and transcendence but is also part of the motivation behind God's activity. Thus, although the notion of transcendence may still be problematic, by blending the

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<sup>78</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 165.

<sup>79</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 175.

concept of divine action with God's holiness, Brunner provides reasons for thinking that the notion of divine action makes sense.

#### 4.1.4. God as Love

Brunner reflects on the claim that God is love and reaches two conclusions. First, Brunner wants to make clear that love is the major theme in the biblical testimony. He offers no standard by which to make such a judgment, but he assumes that most would agree with this assessment. Second, he argues that "love" properly belongs to God's nature and not as a mere attribute or quality that God has. He writes, "This implies that love is not a 'quality' or an 'attribute' of God; God does not share with other beings the quality of being 'loving'. Rather, Love—that is, the love of which the Bible speaks—is the very Nature of God, so that we can say: 'He that abideth in love abideth in God.'"<sup>80</sup>

The following helps us understand what Brunner means when he writes that love "properly" belongs to God's nature. First, Brunner asserts the following:

The Bible really means that Love is God's *Nature*, and not merely His 'temper' (or disposition). Just as sovereignty is His Nature—the Being who is Absolute Subject—so also, to put it in an abstract way for once, so also His Being as Subject is 'for-some-end', it is Being which goes forth from Itself, Being which communicates Itself.<sup>81</sup>

Based on this quotation, the rough idea behind Brunner's claim that love properly belongs to God's nature and is not a mere quality or attribute of God has something to do

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<sup>80</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 185.

<sup>81</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 191-192.



with God being essentially loving and communicating himself. It also seems to deny that God and we share the same attribute of being loving. That is, because “Love is God’s *Nature*,” God is “for-some-end.” Or to put it another way, to say that God is love is to say that God communicates. Second, Brunner also asserts the following that helps to understand the former claim:

That is why it is so important to know the Love of God not as an ‘attribute’, but as the fundamental Nature of God. God’s Nature is the radiation of spiritual energy, an energy which is the will to impart Himself. In contrast to all other forms of existence, this is the Nature of God: the will to impart Himself.<sup>82</sup>

For Brunner, then, God’s love is the root of God’s desire to commune with creation and to communicate to creation. Brunner is also worried that theology has been hijacked by speculative metaphysical thought. Since God’s nature radiates spiritual energy, that is, since God desires and is able to reveal himself, God is the God of revelation. And since God is the God of revelation, “all other ‘knowledge’ of God is an idolatrous materialization of God, however ‘spiritualized’ and abstract it may be.”<sup>83</sup> Of course, by ‘other knowledge’ Brunner refers to any claim about God that is contrary to biblical revelation.

Inferring from Brunner’s discussion of God as Love, the main motivation behind God’s activity is love. And by suggesting that love properly belongs to God’s nature and that, thus, “God’s Nature is the radiation of spiritual energy,” Brunner almost expects

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<sup>82</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 192.

<sup>83</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 192.

God to act. Thus, for Brunner, the notion of love explains (in part) the purpose of God's activity and provides a sense of expectation for God's activity.

#### 4.1.5. God as Triune

Before Brunner goes on to the attributes of God, he discusses God as triune.<sup>84</sup>

Apparently, Brunner does not see a strong connection between divine action and God as triune, but there are some elements in this section that are worth mentioning.

Brunner uses the occasion in his section on the Trinity to talk about Christ and how God works through Christ in his redeeming, perfecting, and electing activity. He writes, "He [that is, Christ] is the active, personal Presence of God, the personal God at work, the Word of God become Person, and the Act of God become Man. In Him God deals with us as the Mediator."<sup>85</sup> The passage indicates three themes in Brunner's thought. First, Brunner emphasizes the personal character of God. Second, Brunner stresses the mediating activity of Jesus Christ. Third, Brunner also stresses the incarnation in God's redemptive activity.

Brunner's emphasis on the incarnation also relates to another one of his emphases: God's desire to have communion with us. He writes,

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<sup>84</sup> One problem that should be apparent is Brunner's discussion of God as love. At times, the reader gets the impression that Brunner's claims about God's nature and how love 'properly' belongs to God's nature (and not as a property or quality of God) leads to problems with God's freedom. Without a well developed doctrine of the trinity, the idea of God's nature radiating spiritual energy, "an energy which is the will to impart himself," could lead to improper models for understanding God's freedom to create the world because of God's need to impart himself.

<sup>85</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 210.

Only the true personal presence of God, only the Incarnation of the Word, and the coming 'in the form of a servant' of Him who was in divine form, can establish the rule of the Holy Lord, and create communion with Him who is love; only God truly present, Himself in Person, can truly reveal God to us, and truly reconcile us to Him.<sup>86</sup>

Again, the themes of a personal God, the Incarnation, and communion with creation by reconciliation seem prominent in Brunner's doctrine of the nature of God. Even in the context of the Trinity, Brunner cannot help but mention these themes.

In the context of the Trinity, Brunner also comments on God's activity in Christ and outside of Christ. In Christ, God acts as "Salvation, Light, and Life." Outside of Christ, God's activity is summed up as a "consuming wrath, which destroys, annihilates, and works in darkness."<sup>87</sup> Both types of action, according to Brunner, are real. The first is a reality for those who are in Christ. The second is a reality for those who are outside of Christ. Thus, for Brunner, at least part of God's activity seems to be centered on the Christ.

Even when Brunner discusses the perfecting of creation, he cannot escape his conviction that God works through Christ and argues that the perfection of creation is done through Christ. He writes,

This Biblical view, however, is connected with the distinction between the worlds which the Father does in the Son, and those which He does in the sphere which is darkness and death, which thus has no part or lot in the Son, who is Light, Life,

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<sup>86</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 219.

<sup>87</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 230.

and Salvation. Thus the web of the true doctrine of Election is inextricably entangled with the correct doctrine of the Triune God.<sup>88</sup>

Again, here we see the connection between the Trinity, God's activity, Christology and also God's work of election.

Thus, although the connection that Brunner identifies between God's activity in the world and various aspects of God's nature is indirect at times, it is nevertheless strong. In the context of the Trinity, Brunner's thought stresses God's activity, albeit through the work of Christ. Brunner's thought also seems to support the claim that the notion that the Trinity, the incarnation, the life and ministry of Jesus can help make sense of divine action. How could it be that God acts? How does a transcendent God act in the world? At least one of the ways that God acts is by becoming incarnate and assuming human nature. Then, God brings light, life and salvation for those who are in Christ, or God brings wrath for those who are outside of Christ. Thus, although Brunner's thought does not prove that God acts, it at the very least provides a possible explanation for how and why God acts in the world, and it demonstrates that what God is like can help make sense of the concept of divine action.

#### 4.2. Brunner: The Attributes of God

Before moving on and examining individual attributes that Brunner associates with the nature of God, some preliminary comments are necessary. As mentioned above, Brunner distinguishes between God's nature and God's attributes. He asserts that claims about God's nature are claims about God as he is in himself, independent of the actual

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<sup>88</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 234.

world. Conversely, claims about God's attributes are claims about God as he relates to this world.

Another way to understand Brunner's distinction between God's nature and God's attributes is the following. Claims about God's nature, say, love, we are claims about God as he has made himself known. Claims about God's attributes, say, omnipotence, are claims about how God's nature "works itself out" in the actual world. Consider the following passage for Brunner's explanation of this idea:

In Himself, however, God is not the Almighty, the Omniscient, the Righteous one; this is what He is in relation to the world which He has created. Or, to put it more correctly, in the statements which refer to the 'attributes of God' we express (on the basis of His self-revelation) God's Nature, as it works itself out and is made known to us in view of the world which has been created by Him. The ideas of divine attributes, which we encounter in the Bible in poetical or in childlike non-reflective forms as direct testimonies of faith, all point back to God's Nature, but they express this Nature of God in relation to different particular aspects of the created world.<sup>89</sup>

The merit of such a view of God's nature and God's attributes is not the subject of discussion at this point. Suffice it to say that Brunner does make a distinction between the two. It should also be noted that Brunner does not intend to suggest that divine attributes are somehow incompatible or inconsistent with God's nature. The force behind his assertion here is that the divine attributes naturally flow from God's nature. God's attributes are manifestations of God's nature as God relates to and acts in the world. This section will now consider Brunner's discussion of the attributes in turn.

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<sup>89</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 247.

#### 4.2.1. God as Almighty

When Brunner begins discussing God as almighty he compares two different approaches: speculative and biblical. He writes, “The Biblical conception means God’s power over the whole universe; but *omnipotentia* means the abstract idea that ‘God can do everything’. It is based upon the idea of ‘being able’, which is entirely absent from the Biblical Idea.”<sup>90</sup> Again, Brunner contrasts the abstract idea of God with the biblical idea of God. And by maintaining the biblical conception of God, Brunner thinks that he avoids abstracting discourse and ideas about God.

What Brunner claims to do, then, is to examine divine omnipotence, or God as Almighty, in the biblical testimony and the context of creation. He states,

The Biblical teaching about Divine Omnipotence is concerned with the relation of God to that which He has created. Briefly, this is what it says: that God has power ‘over all’. Hence it is an Attribute, not a conception of being. God is not, in Himself, ‘the Almighty’—such a statement would be meaningless for the thought of the Bible, since the power that God possess in contrast to that abstract idea that ‘he can do everything’—always means exercising power over *something*.<sup>91</sup>

For Brunner, if we locate divine omnipotence in God’s being, then this would lead to speculative ideas about what God can and can not bring about. As an alternative, he argues that omnipotence is an attribute and not part of God’s nature in any abstract sense.

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<sup>90</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 248.

<sup>91</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 250.

Thus, talk about divine omnipotence should be restricted to God's activity in the actual world.

Although Brunner maintains that omnipotence is an attribute and not part of God's nature, he still claims that omnipotence is, in fact, "rooted in the nature of God."<sup>92</sup> Brunner makes a connection between God's omnipotence and God as "Free and Sovereign Lord," concepts that we already examined in the previous sub-section (4.1.). Brunner writes that God's "power cannot be limited by anything or anyone." He continues, "In His unrestricted freedom he creates the All, over which He, because He is its Creator, has complete authority."<sup>93</sup> However, although Brunner contends that divine omnipotence and lordship are distinct, they seem almost indistinguishable.

Brunner stresses the notion that God is Lord when discussing divine omnipotence by illustrating that God has authority over creation. He writes,

God is free to take the course of nature which He has created into account or not, to preserve it, or to bring it to an end. What the Bible means is especially this freedom of God from the course of Nature, the non-identity of His will with that of the causality of nature. God is the God who can work miracles if He wishes, who can preserve and maintain the course of Nature, or can suspend it, or do away with it entirely, if He wills. The fact that God is Absolute Lord over His own creation is an integral part of His Nature, as the Living God.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 250.

<sup>93</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 250.

<sup>94</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 250.

According to Brunner, God is Lord over creation precisely because God has power over creation. The idea of God as Lord means that God is not identical with the working of nature (i.e., the causality of nature), and thus, God is free to work through the causality of nature. However, because God is Lord of creation and has authority over it, God is also free to suspend the normal working of natural causation and perform special acts.<sup>95</sup>

Brunner also discusses some limitations of God's power, but these limitations are self-imposed. According to Brunner, God limits himself by creating something that is not himself, something which has relative independence. Thus, since God created this self-limitation, he is also able to bring it about that he is no longer limited. Brunner claims,

The course of Nature in the created universe has, it is true, some connexion with certain limitations to God's power, and this is the second important element in the idea of Omnipotence; namely, that God *limits Himself* by creating something which is not Himself, something 'over against' Himself, which he endows with a relative independence. Thus it is God Himself who creates this limitation—hence He is also free to remove it. He creates it, He limits Himself, in order that a creature may have room alongside of Himself, in whom and to whom He can reveal and impart Himself.<sup>96</sup>

Thus, in contrast to the idea of *potestas* or *potentia absoluta*, God's power is limited.<sup>97</sup>

Brunner writes,

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<sup>95</sup> More will be said about this in Chapter Five.

<sup>96</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 251.

<sup>97</sup> Even Protestant scholastics, however, would acknowledge that God's absolute and ordinary power has various limits. Cf. also the discussion of contemporary philosophical theologians such as Ed Wierenga, Peter Geach and James Ross who discuss various limitations on the idea of divine omnipotence.



But this limitation is freely self-imposed; God wills the existence of an independent being alongside of Himself; thus in the last resort this limitation springs from the love of God. Thus there is no limitation from without; the limitation comes from within, and is imposed by the sovereign will of God alone.<sup>98</sup>

As pointed out in an earlier section, love (in part) motivates God's activity. God creates creatures that he can love and who can love in return. The upshot of this creative activity is that God's power is somewhat limited. Brunner does not outline in great detail just how God's power is limited. But the fact that he has created something which is not himself does impose some *prima facie* limitations on God. For example, God could not undo the past action of having created the world.

Furthermore, Brunner talks of God's omnipotence, not necessarily as an unlimited power (in the sense that God can do 'x'), but as an unlimited authority. He asserts,

In the Biblical revelation the Divine Omnipotence means that He is free to deal with the Universe he has created when and how He wills. This is an unlimited Divine Authority, which does not remove the independence of the creature, but does bind it wholly to the life of God; and it is a limitation of the power of God, based solely and simply in His will as Creator and Preserver; which thus not only does not infringe His freedom, but on the contrary asserts it to the full.<sup>99</sup>

The shift from talk about God's power to God's authority is not surprising considering Brunner's section on God as Lord. When Brunner discusses God as Lord, he emphasizes

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<sup>98</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 251.

<sup>99</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 252.

God's creative action as the premise behind God's rule over creation and God's redemptive action as the principle (or the main) manifestation of God's rule.

Brunner could possibly conceive of God's power being limited by numerous things, however he chooses to emphasize the freedom of the creature. Although for Brunner, one of the ways that God demonstrates his power is through creaturely freedom. Despite maximum resistance by humanity and despite the apparent impotence of the cross, God redeems humanity. In other words, God chose not to remove the limitation he imposed on himself (although God could have removed it because his authority is limitless), and, nevertheless, God was able to bring it about that humanity would be redeemed.

Brunner also attempts to tie together some basic concepts about God's activity in the world with certain aspects of what God is like. For Brunner, God's attributes are applications of God's nature. Thus, divine omnipotence is an application of, say, God's rule and authority over creation. Furthermore, God's rule and authority over creation is rooted in God's creative activity qua Creator, and God's rule and authority over creation is properly manifested in God's redemptive activity qua Redeemer. Based on this understanding of God's lordship, it can be inferred that talk of God's authority leads to talk of God's unlimited freedom to act in creation and his ability to redeem it. God can, as Brunner argues, "take the course of nature...into account or not, to preserve it, or to bring it to an end."<sup>100</sup> Brunner can make bold claims about God's activity without balking

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<sup>100</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 250.

because he has firmly established a relation between God's redemptive and creative activity to God's rule and authority over creation.

Thus, Brunner's thought enlightens discourse on divine omnipotence, and, arguably divine action. For Brunner, divine omnipotence does not have to do with what God can and cannot bring about. More precisely, divine omnipotence functions as God's rule and authority over creation. Understanding omnipotence thusly shifts discourse on divine action away from (as Brunner understands it) speculative thought. No doubt, problems linger with regard to omnipotence, but discourse on the relevance of God's creative and redemptive activity, and God's rule and authority over creation for the notion of divine action seems promising. For example, the shift in discourse takes into consideration limitations on God's power but not on God's authority and rule over creation. In addition, stressing God's rule and authority over creation takes into consideration the motivation behind God's activity, which could help explain why God acts, and God's ability to carry out his plan, which could explain how it could be that God acts, namely, that God can act in creation because he has authority over it.

#### 4.2.2. God as Omnipresent and Omniscient

Brunner's discussion of God's omnipresence and omniscience also provides insight. This section examines Brunner's relevant comments on divine omnipresence and omniscience in turn.

For Brunner, the idea that God is omnipresent expresses the proposition that 'God is exalted above space.' God is exalted above the confines of space because, again, God

is Lord over creation. That is, since God created the universe, he has freedom over it. So once again we can see the connection, according to Brunner, between God's attributes and his nature. Divine omnipresence is an expression of the Lordship of God.

Brunner then comments on some of the spatial expressions in the OT and claims that there is a connection between omnipresence and divine action. He notes certain phrases like "God swells in Heaven" and "He looketh down upon the children of men" and suggests that these statements are not to be understood as gross anthropomorphic expressions. Instead, Brunner asserts,

They are the expression of that sovereign glory of God who is Himself the mighty Lord of the universe, for whom there is not spatial 'distance'. The 'coming down', the 'coming' of God, does not belong to the sphere of primitive anthropomorphism but is intended to express the truth that God 'intervenes' in the life of history.<sup>101</sup>

Thus, for Brunner, there is a connection between God's activity and his omnipresence. That is, omnipresence expresses the claim that God acts. Furthermore, according to Brunner, it is in the presence of Jesus Christ where God's presence reaches its climax.<sup>102</sup> He also suggests that we can only understand the idea of omnipresence properly if we consider the whole story of salvation. He writes, "the whole of the story of salvation, the

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<sup>101</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 257.

<sup>102</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 259.

Creation, the Fall, the Old and New Covenant, the Fulfillment, is reflected in the various 'modes' in which the Presence is made known."<sup>103</sup>

With regard to God's knowledge, Brunner states that there are two different kinds of divine knowledge. First, Brunner takes the typical Augustinian approach in understanding God's knowledge. God knows things timelessly, as if they were constantly present before Him. That is, God's knowledge is not temporarily limited. However, Brunner claims that God's objective, exhaustive knowledge is not the center of biblical thought on this subject. Instead, Brunner emphasizes God's interest in creation as the second kind of divine knowledge. He writes, "His knowledge is the expression of His sympathy, His care, His planning, and His love. He 'knows that we have need of before we ask Him'; He also knows the day and the hour of the Parousia."<sup>104</sup> Again, Brunner focuses on an aspect of God's nature (and in this case omniscience) that also stresses God's activity. God's knowledge is an expression of God's care, plan, and love for creation.

So the idea of God's knowledge, according to Brunner, has something to do with God's love for us, and it is this aspect of God's knowledge that he chooses to emphasize. He writes, "It is said of one who is rejected that God 'knows him not'. This 'knowing', then is the expression of His will for communion, of His electing, generous grace and

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<sup>103</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 261.

<sup>104</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 263.

love.”<sup>105</sup> Brunner also calls this loving knowledge of God “the highest, freest, creative act of the loving God.”<sup>106</sup> Thus, Brunner identifies another strong relation between God’s activity and what God is like. God’s intimate knowledge of creation explains God’s loving action.

Brunner also resists an impersonal approach to God’s knowledge. God’s knowledge is not sterile. He writes, “this Omniscience of His is enclosed within His loving interest; it, too, is connected with His comprehensive plan for His Kingdom and for Redemption.”<sup>107</sup> Brunner adds that this knowledge is not merely known by acquisition, but it is known because God wills it since his knowledge is connected to his purpose for creation.

#### 4.2.3. God as Eternal, Immutable, Faithful, and Righteous

According to Brunner, just as the idea of God’s omnipresence means that God is exalted above space, so God’s eternity and immutability mean that God is above change. However, in typical Brunnerian fashion, he warns that we should not get too speculative when thinking about these attributes. Instead, he recommends, think of these attributes in constructive ways. For example, Brunner asserts that God’s demeanor toward time is positive and not negative. He writes,

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<sup>105</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 263.

<sup>106</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 264.

<sup>107</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 265.

the relation of God to Time and to temporal development is not negative but positive. God is infinitely 'interested' in the time-process. It is precisely this which distinguishes the Living God from the absolute Godhead of speculative thought. God takes part in temporal happenings, indeed He even involves Himself in the temporal; He reveals Himself in historical time; He becomes Man.<sup>108</sup>

Two things are worth noting. First, Brunner clearly intends to shift the discussion of eternity away from speculative musings. Second, and more importantly for our discussion, he chooses to emphasize God's activity in creation as a way of understanding God's relation to time. No matter what God's metaphysical relation to time is, God is certainly active in temporal affairs.

God's relation to and activity in creation has to do with God's interest in his handiwork. For Brunner, God's interest in creation means that God (in part) is "not unchangeable."<sup>109</sup> That is, because God has taken an interest in creation he is affected by what happens. Brunner asserts,

God does 'look round'—He does care what happens to men and women—He is concerned about the changes upon earth. He alters His behaviour in accordance with the changes in men. God 'reacts' to the acts of men, and in that He 'reacts', He changes.<sup>110</sup>

Brunner suggests that this idea of the Living God, that is, a God who reacts and acts according to the activity of humanity, is in stark contrast to the divinity of abstract

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<sup>108</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 267-268.

<sup>109</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 268.

<sup>110</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 268.

thought. That is not to say that God is somehow in the process of becoming. Brunner still maintains a level of immutability for God. Brunner's point is that God's immutability and eternity does not imply that God is somehow unaffected by creation. Whatever one's definition of immutability and eternity, it would have to allow for God's interaction with creation.

For Brunner, God's faithfulness has to do with God's promise to carry out this plan, and in order for God to do this, God must act. Brunner claims, "Because God wills the Good unchangeably, He must destroy evil; because God wills the Good, He must, by grace, change the hearts of the wicked, He must lead them to conversion and redemption."<sup>111</sup> In other words, God's nature opposes evil and desires goodness. And in order for God to oppose evil and will good, God must be able to act. God's faithfulness, then, reflects God's resolve to redeem creation.

Just as God's faithfulness reflects God's resolve and constancy to redeem creation, so God's righteousness reflects God's will for human activity. Brunner writes, "God claims man for Himself. He wills that man should be, and live, and act—both in his own life and in his dealings with others—in a particular way, and not otherwise. And this will of God, which demands so much of man, is unchangeable and immutable."<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, God's righteousness is something that stems from God and not from

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<sup>111</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 272.

<sup>112</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 278.



something outside of him. And in order for God to maintain righteousness, God must act.

Thus, the nature of God continues to explain the nature of his activity.

Thus, according to the thought of Brunner, God's eternity, immutability, faithfulness, and righteousness explain some aspect of God's activity or vice versa. God's activity limits discourse on divine eternity by claiming that God is active in temporal affairs. God's activity also limits discourse on what can be claimed about divine immutability. Because of Brunner's stress on God's interest in creation, namely, that God reacts and acts according to the activity of humanity, divine immutability must be mitigated. Furthermore, for Brunner, God's faithfulness explains the purpose behind God's activity, but it also stresses Brunner's emphasis on the fall for thinking about divine action. Finally, the righteousness of God explains that at least part of God's activity revolves around his desire for human obedience. And this aspect of God's activity, argues Brunner, is immutable.

#### 4.2.4. The Wisdom and Glory of God

Finally, Brunner turns to God's wisdom and glory. Both the wisdom and glory of God are manifested in Creation, and both proceed directly from God's being. Just as righteousness comes from God, so does wisdom. Brunner writes, "The same God who guides the heavenly constellations on their way and 'counts the number of the stars', in addition to their path and their number, has also established the truths of mathematics, just as He has established the orders of Nature."<sup>113</sup> Thus, Creation reveals the *divine*

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<sup>113</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 282.

wisdom and not the divine knowledge of some other wisdom above God. Furthermore, divine wisdom is connected to divine omnipotence. Brunner calls the divine wisdom an ideal aspect of divine omnipotence. In other words, God's wisdom, in a way, provides an unlimited amount of creativity to God's activity.<sup>114</sup> Thus, the manifestation of God's wisdom in creation demonstrates only a part of God's wisdom.

God's glory is also manifested in creation. Brunner claims, "This Glory proceeds wholly from God's Being; it is based solely in Him and that not merely as His work, but in His Presence. And yet it is not His nature in itself, but His nature in His revelation, the will which has accomplished its purpose, the realized and completed Presence of God."<sup>115</sup> The idea that God's glory is present in creation characterizes much of Scripture, according to Brunner. The presence of God's glory in creation serves as more evidence that God desires to communicate who he is with creation.

## **5. Towards a Theology of Divine Action**

This section draws conclusions based on Brunner's doctrine of God. The modest proposal being made is that there are some elements within Brunner's discussion of God's nature that can help make sense of God's activity. First, this section will make some concluding comments regarding Brunner's thought on the nature and attributes of

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<sup>114</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 283.

<sup>115</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 287.

God. Second, based on some of these concluding comments, I will make a suggestion as to how to begin thinking about the nature of the divine agent.

In his doctrine of God, Brunner is mindful of the issue of divine action even though he does not address it as an independent topic. Rather than address it independently, Brunner weaves the notion of God's activity in the world throughout his discussion of the nature and attributes of God. In fact, Brunner constructs his thought in such a way that there appears to be a reciprocal relation between God's nature and God's activity. Now, a summary of this thought will be considered.

First, the concept of divine action appears in Brunner's discussion of the nature of God. For example, when Brunner discusses the name of God, he chooses to emphasize that God is personal and desires to have communion with creation. Why else, wonders Brunner, would God have given us his name? Plus, when Brunner addresses God as lord, he does so by discussing the concept of *intervention*. Brunner argues that God is not merely involved in nature but demonstrates that he is Lord over it by intervening in the course of nature. And the highest manifestation of God's authority and rule over creation is God's redemptive activity. In addition, for Brunner, God's redeeming activity is inextricably linked to his thought on the Trinity. How could it be that God acts? At least one of the ways that God acts is by becoming incarnate and assuming human nature. In addition, God's holiness, for Brunner, explains some of God's activity in the world. That is, holiness explains why God actively engages in protecting his holiness and that God desires humanity to act in accordance with his holiness. That is, the notion of holiness

explains that God actively protects his holiness, desires to be known, glorified, and obeyed. Thus, when people are disobedient, God judges, and through the Father's love, the Son redeems. All of this is incoherent without the claim that God acts. That is, in order for God to do these things, God must act.

Second, the concept of divine action appears in Brunner's discussion of the attributes of God. For example, his section on God's power is full of references to God's activity in the world. Brunner does not occupy himself with some of the dilemmas that this topic usually brings, but rather, he chooses to emphasize what God actually does in order to understand the nature of omnipotence. Whatever one thinks of divine omnipotence, Brunner warns that one should stay away from impersonal metaphors because, for Brunner, the manifestation of God's power is found in his redemption of creation. The redeeming acts of God stem from his love for the world and his desire to reconcile a fallen world with him. The fact that God was able to bring redemption about evidences that he is in fact omnipotent, but God's authority and rule over creation explains how God is able to bring about reconciliation.

Some of the attributes stem from God's creative and redemptive activity. How would one know about God's rule and authority over creation had God not acted and revealed his nature to us? And some of the insights into divine action come from what God does, say, when God reveals his name. Brunner argues that because God revealed his name to humanity, God must be personal and also desire to have a relationship with humanity. God as personal and his desire to have a relationship with humanity explains

at least some of his activity. Thus, making sense of divine action needs to include these aspects. And some aspects of God's nature explain God's activity.

The other attributes, like omnipresence and omniscience also help make sense of divine action. Again and again, Brunner highlights that God is personal, Lord, and desires to have communion with creation. In fact, for Brunner, the key concept for making sense of omniscience is God's love which explains God's care and plan for creation. He writes, "It is said of one who is rejected that God 'knows him not'. This 'knowing', then, is the expression of His will for communion, of His electing, generous grace and love."<sup>116</sup> Brunner does not reject outright other notions of omniscience, but rather, he stresses God's knowledge in connection with God's activity. Perhaps the idea that God wants and has an intimate knowledge of humanity can help explain certain activities of God, say, sending his only Son to die for the sins of many.

The preceding paragraphs look like the beginning of a model of divine action. While the scholarship has tended to be more scientific, philosophical or biblical in nature, this model has a more theological approach. This theological approach takes a wide range of attributes into consideration when thinking about divine action and it also takes into consideration what God actually does. And even if Brunner did not intend to demonstrate the reciprocal relation between God's nature and activity, the relation is evident nonetheless. The argument being made here is not that other approaches of making sense of divine action are invalid. More precisely, considering the nature of God

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<sup>116</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 263.

and what God does supplements contemporary scholarship on divine action and provides a more thorough model of God's activity.

The full implication of taking who God is and what God does seriously is yet to be determined. Still, the result so far is that we begin to understand God's activity as personal, triune, powerful, and loving. God meets us. God redeems us. God gives us his name. The Father cares for us, and demonstrates his care by sending his Son to actively save us. The fact that God is able to redeem creation is rooted in the fact that God brought creation about. This is the root of God's authority and power. And in order for God to do these things, God must act.

## **6. Conclusion**

It has been argued that the concept of divine action can help make sense of who God is. While this seems to be true, it also seems to be the case that there is a give and take relation between God's nature and God's activity. Perhaps examining a single attribute, say, divine goodness creates some interesting conceptual dilemmas for conceiving of divine action. But we do not necessarily have to think of divine action in this way. We may also consider a wide range of what God is like, and then draw some conclusions about divine action.

In the beginning of the chapter, we examined some of the recent scholarship on divine action, and determined that there was more work to be done. The route chosen

was to examine the contribution of Brunner to this discussion. Brunner found himself doing theology in a time when the concept of God's activity in the world came into doubt. Brunner's contemporary, Rudolf Bultmann, claimed that the only way to make sense of God's activity was to existentialize it. Brunner disagreed.

Brunner presents his doctrine of God in such a way that makes sense of divine action. His discussion on God's nature helps make sense of God's activity in the world by explaining, in part, the effect, purpose, intention, and nature of God's activity, but also by a give and take relation between the nature of God and what God does. This reciprocal relation stresses other aspects of God's nature, like God's intimate knowledge of creation and God's rule and authority over creation, which helps make sense of some aspects of God's activity.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### DIVINE AND HUMAN ACTION

#### 1. Introduction

Chapter 1 introduced the thesis for the dissertation, which claimed that considering what God actually does and what God is like can help construct a model of divine action. Chapter 2 surveyed the current state of scholarship on divine action, noting that most of the recent literature defends the basic concept of a God who acts against various problems associated with it without developing comprehensive models or theories. In chapter 3, Brunner's thought on the nature and attributes of God was considered, and then it was argued that exploring the reciprocal relation between God's nature and God's activity gains significant insights that can contribute to making sense of God's activity.

This chapter considers the relation between divine and human action and shows that Brunner's thought on God's work in creation, providence, and redemption illuminates the relation between divine and human action. Typically, scholarship focuses on divine concurrence, but examining claims about God's work in creation and redemption, and God's original intention to have communion with creation helps clarify our understanding of the extent and degree of God's activity in relation to human activity. Thus, God's work needs to be taken seriously when discussing the relation between divine and human action.



This chapter has three basic parts. The first involves briefly looking at the background of the discussion on divine and human action. The second considers the contribution that Brunner's theology can make to this discussion. The third applies Brunner's contribution to a rough model of divine and human action and then looks at the implications of this approach.

## 2. History of Scholarship

As mentioned in chapter two, the relation between divine and human action is a key issue for understanding divine action as a whole. It was also suggested in chapter two that the renewed interest in divine agency and human agency is partly due to trends in agency theory and partly due to the emergence and influence of process theism. As a result, Christian theologians and philosophers are offering their own models of divine and human action.<sup>1</sup>

Before considering the scholarship, though, it is important to review some terminology. As mentioned in the first chapter, the term 'divine action' includes, but is not limited to, divine providence. Thus, 'divine action' as the larger category includes divine providence and, for example, God's creative and redemptive activities. When

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994); Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994); Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998); and Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

scholars discuss the relation between divine and human action, divine providence dominates the discussion. In fact, scholars usually discuss one aspect of providence, namely, divine concurrence, as it relates to divine and human action.<sup>2</sup>

The key issue that has surfaced in contemporary literature has to do with what God is logically capable of bringing about and with the nature of human voluntary action.<sup>3</sup> Apparently, how one understands that key issue impacts how one understands the relation between divine and human action. Basinger puts the issue this way: “*Are there limitations on God’s ability to unilaterally control voluntary human decision-making (and thus voluntary action)?*”<sup>4</sup> This may be the crux, but there are other issues to examine in order to make sense of the relation between divine and human action. Sections three through four of this chapter will address this question more fully.

As noted in the introduction, scholars typically focus on divine concurrence in discourse on the relation between divine and human action. For example, at a conference in 2000, scholars such as Edward Wierenga, William Lane Craig, William Hasker, John Sanders, and Thomas Flint each presented essays that, more or less, broadly addressed

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<sup>2</sup> In his essay, “The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God,” Peter van Inwagen defines concurrence as “the doctrine that God must cooperate with a created thing in order for that thing to act on another thing.” Peter van Inwagen, “The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God,” *God, Knowledge, and Mystery* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 47.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this discussion, cf. Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; revised edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 25.

the issue of divine and human action, but specifically addressed divine concurrence as the key issue.<sup>5</sup>

For example, Wierenga's essay defended a theory of God's knowledge referred to as "middle knowledge." Middle knowledge, according to Wierenga, refers to God's knowledge of

propositions that are intermediate between, on the one hand, those that are independent of God's will or creative activity but necessarily true, and, on the other hand, those that are contingently true but dependent upon God for their truth.<sup>6</sup>

With this understanding of middle knowledge Wierenga argues that Molinism (named after the scholar that proposed the theory of middle knowledge)<sup>7</sup> has the best of both worlds: a strong sense of human freedom and divine sovereignty. The idea here is that since God knows what possible free human agents would do in any possible set of circumstances God can, by creating the appropriate circumstance, bring it about that his purposes and ends are reached and that they are reached, at the same time, freely by human agents.

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Wierenga, "Providence, Middle Knowledge, and the Grounding Objection"; William Lane Craig, "Middle Knowledge, Truth Makers, and the 'Grounding Objection'"; William Hasker, "The Antinomies of Divine Providence"; John Sanders, "Mapping the Terrain of Divine Providence"; Thomas P. Flint, "The Possibilities of Incarnation: Some Radical Molinist Suggestions," 47<sup>th</sup> Annual Wheaton Philosophy Conference, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Wierenga, "Providence, Middle Knowledge, and the Grounding Objection," 1.

<sup>7</sup> Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

Sanders's essay presents various approaches in dealing with the relation between divine and human action. In the beginning of Sanders's paper, for example, he claims that his essay will "survey the different understandings of divine providence, showing the areas of agreement and disagreement regarding the key issues."<sup>8</sup> However, what follows in Sanders' essay are six various understandings of divine concurrence. According to Sanders, divine concurrence appears to be the key issue.

Similar to Sanders, Terrance Tiessen's work also focuses on divine concurrence. Tiessen, in his book, outlines multiple models of divine providence.<sup>9</sup> As already mentioned in chapter two, the main problem with Tiessen's work is that it focuses on the extent and degree of divine involvement with creation. The result is that the models which are presented tend to focus on the relation between divine and human action, and, even in that case, they focus on what God is logically capable of bringing about and on the nature of human voluntary action.

Not all scholarship on the relation between divine and human action focuses on divine concurrence, though. For example, Sanders presents a more comprehensive theory of divine providence and presents biblical examples of the openness model of divine action, a discussion of the nature of God, and some applications to the Christian life.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Paul Helm, in his *The Providence of God*, addresses other concepts such as the

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<sup>8</sup> Sanders, "Mapping the Terrain of Divine Providence," 1.

<sup>9</sup> Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer*, 20. In the introduction, Tiessen states that his intention is to provide models of providence.

<sup>10</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*.

theological framework of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and also the concepts of guidance, prayer, responsibility and the problem of evil. Finally, Thomas Tracy's essay, "Evil, Human Freedom, and Divine Grace," raises the issue of the relevance of the theological traditions that gave rise to the problems within divine and human action in the first place.<sup>11</sup> So there is some evidence that scholars address other issues when discussing the relation between divine and human action.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, contemporary scholarship tends to discuss the relation between divine and human action within the context divine concurrence. This leads to a discussion of the language of causation and intention, divine omnipotence, divine sovereignty and human freedom, the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and human freedom, and prayer. If we broadened the context of the discussion to include a wide range of theological topics, we may be able to harvest some more fruit for this discussion. To this end, the contribution of Brunner will now be considered.

### 3. Theological Contribution of Brunner

#### 3.1. Providence

Since scholarship tends to focus on providence and divine concurrence, we will begin our look at Brunner's contribution with his comments on God's work in

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas F. Tracy, "Evil, Human Freedom, and Divine Grace," *Human and Divine Agency*, eds. F. Michael McLain and W. Mark Richardson (Lanham: University Press of America, 1999), 167-168.

<sup>12</sup> For some hopeful comments to this end, cf. Patrick Miller's editorial, "Revisiting the God Who Acts," in *Theology Today* 54 (April 1997): 1-5.

providence. This section overlaps with a discussion of providence in chapter five. Chapter five examines God's relation to nature. Thus, providence is also an essential part of that discussion. However, chapter four considers another aspect of providence, namely, the relation between divine and human action. With that said, this section will consider Brunner's discussion of providence and then focus the discussion to the relation between divine and human action, namely, divine concurrence.

In the beginning of his section on providence, Brunner provides a definition. Providence, he writes, is "that action, and that present activity of God in the world which is only indirectly, not directly, related to the redemption of the world."<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note that Brunner immediately identifies the providential activity of God with God's redemptive activity even if indirectly so.

Brunner continues by outlining various aspects of providence that he will be discussing: the relationship between God and nature, divine action and history, divine and human action, human freedom and divine "over-ruling," and "events which are determined by human aims, and those controlled by the Divine Purpose."<sup>14</sup> Brunner also mentions two theological problems, namely the problem of evil and miracles, and one philosophical problem, namely determinism and freedom.

Early in his section on providence, Brunner discusses the distinction between preservation and creation. Some scholars, Brunner points out, cloud the distinction so

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<sup>13</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1952), 148.

<sup>14</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 148.

that there is no genuine providence but only continuous creation. The problem, argues Brunner, is that scholars emphasize divine causality. He writes, “If all that is, and all that happens, is simply the activity of God, that is, if the doctrine of the Omnipotence of God becomes the doctrine of His *sole* power, and the doctrine of His total activity becomes that of His *sole* activity, then, in fact, the difference between creation and preservation becomes very indistinct.”<sup>15</sup> According to Brunner, if one abandons the idea that there is causality other than God’s, then one embraces pantheism.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the sort of “omni-causality” that Brunner has in mind appears to entail a version of pantheism.

Brunner’s aversion for the concept of divine omni-causality appears to be related to his view on omnipotence and God’s self-imposed limitation.<sup>17</sup> He asserts,

In an earlier volume in the chapter on divine omnipotence, we pointed out the serious consequences which result from this idea of God’s sole activity; in the light of the fundamental Biblical conception of God as Creator and Lord of the world, we firmly rejected this dangerous view.<sup>18</sup>

The main motivation behind Brunner’s view appears to be his claim that when God created the world, God created something that was not himself, and so God limits himself to a certain degree. He states,

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<sup>15</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 149.

<sup>16</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 149.

<sup>17</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 248-255.

<sup>18</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 149

Since we take the idea of the Creation of the World seriously, we say: There is an existence which is not that of God, but is a creaturely existence, one therefore which is distinguished from the existence of God. Without a certain independent existence the creature cannot stand over against God, and if it does not do so, then it is not a creature as contrasted with the Creator.<sup>19</sup>

If this is true, argues Brunner, then “there is also an activity of God in and on this existence which is distinct from himself, in and on the world He has created, which is not the activity of the Creator, but of the Preserver, the Ruler, or even the Redeemer.”<sup>20</sup>

Thus, Brunner concludes, preservation and creation are not the same things.

Brunner also discusses the danger of deism. Deism, writes Brunner, “consists in laying so much stress on the independence of the created existence that the world is regarded as so independent of the divine activity that it is self-sufficient.”<sup>21</sup> According to Brunner, deism’s view of divine action leads to a view of God that minimally intervenes in the world, and, for the most part, lets the world follow its own course.

Pantheism and deism are two ways for conceiving of divine action. However, Brunner resists the temptation to offer a third (and what he would consider to be a speculative) concept. Instead, he suggests that a proper doctrine of providence ought to be grounded in Christian faith. The following nicely summarizes Brunner’s thought on providence. He states,

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<sup>19</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 149.

<sup>20</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 149.

<sup>21</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 149-150



God the Lord creates a creature, in whom He wills to be glorified, and with whom He wills to have communion. But He can only have communion with that which is not Himself. Communion pre-supposes differentiation. Further: God wills to have communion with His creatures in such a way that they freely return Him love for love, and in so doing give glory to Him. The whole of creation has been made for this maximum of creaturely independence, for the free creature, capable of loving God in freedom. On the other hand, if God wills to be glorified in His creation, then the freedom of the creature cannot be inherent in man's nature, it can only be derived from Himself. It is not independence which constitutes the freedom based on God the Creator, but on the contrary, it is that freedom which is identical with complete dependence.<sup>22</sup>

This passage echoes much of what Brunner discussed in his volume on the nature of God. One of the main themes in his discussion on the nature of God is God's desire to have communion with humanity. Communion is only possible (as Brunner understands it) if it is done freely, that is, voluntarily. Yet, Brunner adds that even though freedom and independence (as Brunner understands it) is a necessary condition for communion, the creature is dependent on God for that same freedom and independence.<sup>23</sup>

It is safe to conclude from his preliminary statement on providence, then, that Brunner's concept of the relationship between divine and human action avoids the extremes of deism and pantheism and is consistent with his earlier claims about God's nature, namely, God desires to have communion with creation.

Brunner also discusses the "how" of the relation between divine and human action, but he thinks this question is inherently problematic given human freedom and

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<sup>22</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 150.

<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, Brunner states that this idea of the relationship between divine and human action does not rest on some speculative metaphysic. It is revelation, argues Brunner, that determines "our 'metaphysic.'" Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 151.

God's desire to have communion with humanity. Brunner begins to address this issue by examining (what he calls) the Scholastic and Protestant Orthodox distinction of divine concurrence. The idea of concurrence is that God's activity co-operates with human activity in bringing about a state of affairs.<sup>24</sup> Immediately, Brunner rejects the idea of divine concurrence because the language of causation is usually associated with it.<sup>25</sup> He claims that there "is causality between created objects, but there is none between the Creator and the Creation."<sup>26</sup> For Brunner, using causation language to explain divine concurrence with human action is especially problematic. That is, the concept of divine concurrence is inherently problematic because it renders the independence of humanity null.<sup>27</sup> And since the (relative) independence of humanity is a necessary condition for communion with God, Brunner rejects the idea of divine concurrence.

Despite Brunner's insistence that humanity is free and independent, he still has a strong sense of divine guidance. He contends, "All that is, and all that happens, takes place within the knowledge and the will of God. Thus there is nothing 'casual' about life, nothing that happens 'anyhow'."<sup>28</sup> In addition, despite Brunner's rejection of the idea of divine concurrence and his assertion that humanity is free and independent, God still directs the things that happen in order to bring about his plan and purpose. Brunner

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<sup>24</sup> van Inwagen, "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God," 47.

<sup>25</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 153-154.

<sup>26</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 153.

<sup>27</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 154.

<sup>28</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 155.

writes, “All that happens is connected with the divine Purpose; all is ordered in accordance with, and in subordination to, the divine plan and the final divine purpose.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, for Brunner, God guides creation’s affairs and guides them toward his intended end.

Brunner qualifies his thought on providence by comparing it to the Stoic conception of providence. As Brunner understands it, the Christian idea of providence is personal, and the Stoic idea of providence is impersonal. He writes, “the Stoic idea of Providence—like that of Platonism and of Modern Idealism—is impersonal. It is an impersonal world-reason which lies behind all that happens in the world.”<sup>30</sup> For Brunner, this impersonal aspect of providence is incompatible with the Christian idea of providence. An impersonal concept of providence seems even more problematic when considering Brunner’s emphasis that God is personal by nature.

Brunner also claims that there is a second, related difference between the two ideas of providence. He asserts, “the Stoic is only aware of a general, but not of a special or personal Providence. In faith in the God revealed in Christ I know that God not only ‘calls me by my name,’ but that also, quite personally, He has included me in His plan for the world.”<sup>31</sup> That is, the biblical notion of providence is not impersonal and sterile like

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<sup>29</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 155.

<sup>30</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 155.

<sup>31</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 156.

the Stoic account. As in Brunner's discussion of God's nature, God's desire for communion with humanity and love for humanity guides his activity.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, there is a third, related difference between the Christian and the Stoic view. Brunner writes, "the Christian view, but not the Stoic, is wholly teleological, related to the End, determined by the End."<sup>33</sup> The following nicely states Brunner's thought on the personal and teleological aspect of divine providence. He asserts,

The God of revelation does not only 'fore'-see, but He sees right down the course of events to the End of all things, to the final End. The will and the thought which is revealed in Jesus Christ as the will and thought of God is His thought and will expressing His purpose for the whole world; the providence which is the origin and the basis of all that happens is the Logos, who, as the Son, is at the same time the final End of all that happens, the chief corner-stone, the [head], in whom all is knit together, towards whom everything is moving, or to put it more exactly: towards whom God has ordered everything, and in whom therefore everything must finally end and reach its goal.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, as Brunner understands providence, God is personally active in the affairs of his creatures, conducting their activity according to his purpose, and bringing about his desired end. The end of all this activity, according to Brunner, is Jesus Christ.

Interestingly, Brunner has linked the concept of providence, election, and divine purpose together.<sup>35</sup> This connection is beginning to look like a model of divine action that

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<sup>32</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 157.

<sup>33</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 157.

<sup>34</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 157.

<sup>35</sup> Brunner then moves from this broad discussion of providence to a discussion of miracles, which we will address in the next chapter.

takes into account what God does and what God is like. That is, Brunner's view of God's purpose and plan for the world, his notion that God deeply desires communion with humanity, his emphasis that God is personal, and his contention that God's providential activity relates to God's redemptive activity influences his notion of divine action. In fact, these factors make up the content of and also explain divine action.

### 3.2. Divine Concurrence

Given his strong sense of divine involvement in the affairs of the world, Brunner anticipates this specific question: "If all that happens is determined by the will of God, how can human freedom be possible?"<sup>36</sup> Brunner admits that the concepts of 'determinism from below' and 'determinism from above' are potentially problematic to the concept of human freedom. He writes, "The former view [i.e., determinism from below] denies human freedom from the point of view of the assertion of a causal natural order of all that happens."<sup>37</sup> Determinism from above, Brunner argues, "declares that human freedom is an illusion, because all that happens, even human action, is due to divine Providence."<sup>38</sup> According to Brunner, nobody lives their life according to "determinism from below," and only a few Christian thinkers have held to a view similar to "determinism from above."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 170.

<sup>37</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 170. Brackets mine.

<sup>38</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 171.

<sup>39</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 171.

Brunner mentions Zwingli and Calvin as two thinkers who have held to “determinism from above.” Zwingli’s view of providence, writes Brunner, makes God the cause of sin. Calvin’s view of providence leads to the same conclusion as Zwingli’s, but Calvin does not admit it as openly. According to Brunner, Calvin is, thus, less logical than Zwingli. Brunner writes, “Calvin denies human freedom, but he also maintains full human responsibility, while at the same time he asserts that God alone determines all that happens, without, however, ascribing to Him the origin of evil.”<sup>40</sup> The idea that human responsibility is compatible with determinism from above is, according to Brunner, incoherent. For Brunner, the claim that God alone determines or brings about every state of affairs is incompatible with the claim that something or someone else determines or brings about the exact same state of affairs.<sup>41</sup>

For Brunner, Calvin’s claim has logical difficulties. Logical difficulties are not Brunner’s only concern, though. We will continue our investigation.

Brunner moves on to discuss the doctrine of providence as it has been revealed in revelation. Part of his view of providence is influenced by his view of divine omnipotence and omniscience. He writes,

Here, first of all, we must remind ourselves of what was said earlier about the Omnipotence and the Omniscience of God. The God of revelation is indeed not

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<sup>40</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 172.

<sup>41</sup> This is assuming, of course, that bringing about a state of affair is a necessary condition for being responsible for that same state of affair. And Brunner’s concept of revelation as “encounter” is also at play here. There is some tension evident here between Brunner’s desire to maintain some of God’s unilateral activity and the interpersonal communication of God.

the *potestas absoluta* of speculation, but the God who limits Himself, in order to create room for the creature. God wills to have a real 'counterpart.'<sup>42</sup>

Brunner's view of the nature of God, then, seems to guide how he conceives of God's providence and leads him to rule out 'determinism from above.' He writes, "The idea of the divine self-limitation is included in that of the creation of a world which is not God, and in so doing the idea of *potestas absoluta* or of omni-causality has been given up."<sup>43</sup> The concept of 'divine self-limitation,' then, plays a role in Brunner's thought on providence and appears to play a role in Brunner's rejection of Calvin's view.

Furthermore, Brunner's concept of divine self-limitation seems to be influenced by his contention that God desires to have communion with his creatures. He states,

God wills and creates free creatures because He desires communion, not unity. He wills to be worshipped in freedom. This is the only sense in which Omnipotence, Omniscience, and Providence are conceived within the sphere of the Christian Faith.<sup>44</sup>

In other words, Brunner thinks that whatever is said about providence has to be within the confines of divine self-limitation and the idea that God desires to have communion with creatures. Brunner writes, "All other interests, logical, metaphysical, religious, and ethical—are secondary, all have to fit into this framework."<sup>45</sup> Thus, God's desire to have

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<sup>42</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 172.

<sup>43</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 173.

<sup>44</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 173.

<sup>45</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 173.

communion with his creatures is the background within which we should understand the relation between divine and human activity.<sup>46</sup> Thus, Brunner thinks that Calvin's view has both logical and theological problems.

There also appears to be a connection between understanding providence, divine self-limitation, and the doctrine of election. Brunner writes,

But if we start from the point where Election and Providence are identical, in the further development of the idea of Providence we come to the following conclusion: as those who have been called by God into responsible existence, we know that God's action gives us existence in freedom.<sup>47</sup>

That is, since God desires to have communion with creatures, and since God holds creatures responsible for their actions, then God must have created us with a necessary capacity for freedom.

One major problem remains, though: How could it be that God's creatures are free and at the same time that God is still Lord and Sovereign? Brunner asserts,

Here we are not faced by an intellectual problem, nor by a paradox, but by the impenetrable mystery of the divine working of Omnipotence, the working of Almighty God, who limits himself, in order that He may make room for His creatures, and yet, because He *limits Himself*, does not cease to be Lord of all that happens.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 173.

<sup>47</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 174.

<sup>48</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 175.



The claim that we are free and responsible and the claim that God is Lord and Sovereign are both true, argues Brunner. However, Brunner does not explain just *how* these two claims can be true. They just are.<sup>49</sup> Brunner writes, “To see through this mystery is the prerogative of the Creator, the mystery of His Nature and of His action.”<sup>50</sup> However, Brunner does not discuss the ‘how’ of divine and human action any further. That is, he does not make an attempt to reconcile the two concepts.<sup>51</sup>

Although Brunner rejects divine concurrence on theological grounds, his view still faces problems. He argues that reconciling divine and human action is not an intellectual problem. However, rejecting divine concurrence and suggesting that the relation between divine and human action is a mystery does not remove the dilemma; it only ignores it. Thus, although Brunner’s thought helps demonstrate that theological claims about what God does and what God is like are relevant for thinking about divine and human action, some problems persist.

### 3.3. Divine Government

Brunner also discusses the idea of divine providence as God’s government of creation whereby God controls the outcome of history. For Brunner, the idea of divine preservation has to do with the relation between divine action and the existence of things. God preserves the existence of all things. The idea of divine government concerns the

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<sup>49</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 175.

<sup>50</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 175.

<sup>51</sup> The “how” is an important issue. Again, part of tension exists because of his view of the interpersonal communication of God and his desire to maintain a strong sense of divine action in creation and redemption.

relation between divine action and the course of history. The divine government of the world, Brunner writes, “means that the natural course of history...cannot be understood in itself, but only in the light of a continual activity and presence of God, who, in this historical course, orders the whole of History towards the final divine goal.”<sup>52</sup>

Given Brunner’s claim that God controls the whole of history, the issue of human freedom looms again. Brunner wonders, again, “how can divine and human action coincide?”<sup>53</sup> When thinking about divine preservation, the problem, according to Brunner, focused on human freedom. How can *human* action be free if God is Lord and sovereign over all that happens? This time the focus is on *divine* action. What sense can be made of God’s government of the course of history given the human experience of history?<sup>54</sup>

The human experience of history leads to the problem of evil, but Brunner maintains that God is active nonetheless. Brunner offers various approaches to dealing with the problem. Initially, he admits that one solution is to deny that God governs the course of history. However, argues Brunner, “this is tantamount to saying that God has nothing to do with history.”<sup>55</sup> He continues this thought by writing, “Such a view might be possible for those who hold a certain Platonist Idea of God, but within the Biblical

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<sup>52</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 176.

<sup>53</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 176.

<sup>54</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 176.

<sup>55</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 177.

doctrine of God it is absolutely impossible. For the living God is the 'God of History.'"<sup>56</sup>

In fact, Brunner indicates that it is only in the Christian world view that the problem of evil becomes compelling. The reason for this, he argues, is that the Christian view of God maintains a strong connection between divine action and the course of history.<sup>57</sup>

Furthermore, Brunner adds that if we abandon the concept of divine government, then we must also abandon the Cross. He writes, "...the Crucifixion is on the one hand the act of God, indeed *the* act of God absolutely, the Act upon which the whole Christian Faith rests; at the same time it is the most incredible, the most terrible scandal in the whole history of the human race."<sup>58</sup> Therefore, we have a choice. We can either abandon the Christian faith, or else we can admit that history is full of injustice. Brunner argues that, as a result of this choice, we have to acknowledge both that history is full of injustice and that God is the God of history.<sup>59</sup>

Brunner then examines various solutions to the problem of evil. His examination covers the book of Job, the theodicy of Leibnitz, dualism, Luther, and the New

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<sup>56</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 177.

<sup>57</sup> Here, Brunner implies that the concept of a weak connection between divine action and the course of history does not present the same level of concern for the problem of evil. I think it would be more accurate to say that the problem changes but still maintains the same level of urgency. For example, in process thought, divine action is less connected to the course of history than in traditional Christian theism. The process view, then, creates another problem of evil. Under the process view, God is severely limited in what he can do about evil in the world.

<sup>58</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 177.

<sup>59</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 177.

Testament.<sup>60</sup> His discussion of the NT solution to the problem of evil is the most interesting and the most relevant to this chapter.

To begin with, Brunner argues that the NT, “*as a whole* is an answer to the question of theodicy.”<sup>61</sup> He stresses,

God has not only created the creatures who are not free, who cannot do anything other than obey His will; but He has also created creatures who have a free will, who *can* become disobedient, who can decide against His will. The fact that this has happened, is evident to all; *why* it happened—that is the irrational element, to which there is no answer.<sup>62</sup>

Conduct contrary to the will of God is the source of evil and suffering in the world.

According to Brunner, this is the element of truth in dualism. The NT clearly presents the idea that Christ is in a struggle and eventually wins over the powers of evil.

However, the NT does not explain why there is a struggle in the first place.

That is not to say that God has nothing whatsoever to do with those states of affairs that are contrary to his will. Brunner writes, “The God of the Bible is not like that ‘God’ who in Borchardt’s drama *Draussen vor der Tur* (Outside the Door) is represented as a pitiful old man who is always weeping and wailing and saying ‘I can’t help it!’”<sup>63</sup>

God is doing something about evil.

The Cross is the prime example of divine government. Brunner writes,

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<sup>60</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 178-181.

<sup>61</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 181.

<sup>62</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 181.

<sup>63</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 181.

From the human point of view, from that freedom, it is that maximum of that freedom which men have sinfully abused, which is fighting against God, and to which God Himself opposed. At the same time, the Cross is God's sovereign act of redemption. Judas, Caiaphas and Pilate are the enemies of Christ and God is therefore their enemy. At the same time they are instruments of God, through which, more than in any other event, He reveals His righteousness and His love.<sup>64</sup>

According to Brunner, on the one hand, the event of the crucifixion is an evil state of affairs contrary to God's will and something that God did not bring about. On the other hand, the crucifixion is also a state of affairs that God brought about and a state of affairs that God used in order to bring about redemption.<sup>65</sup> Thus, the crucifixion demonstrates the mystery of divine government in the world. In addition, the crucifixion functions not as a theoretical answer to the problem of evil but as an existential answer. That is, the reality of evil is really solved by an act of God.<sup>66</sup>

Brunner's discussion of divine government demonstrates that although he thinks there are problems associated with it (e.g., the problem of evil), he also argues that it cannot be abandoned without abandoning the Christian faith. The notion of divine government is indispensable because this notion contains essential beliefs of the Christian faith, including the life and death of Christ. And although Brunner has a strong sense of divine government, it appears to be mitigated by other concepts such as human freedom and responsibility, and God's desire to have communion with humanity. In addition, as

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<sup>64</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 181-182.

<sup>65</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 182.

<sup>66</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 184.

in Brunner's discussion of God's nature, there appears to be a give-and-take relation between the concept of divine action and what God does and what God is like. This chapter now considers other aspects of Brunner's theology in order to understand more fully his thought on divine and human action.

### 3.4. Humanity as Created

The previous chapter discussed the nature of God. Brunner's discussion of the divine nature provided insights into the nature of the divine agent. This section examines Brunner's discussion of the nature of humanity as it relates to the topic of divine action. It will be demonstrated that Brunner's discussion of the nature of humanity provides insights into the relation between divine and human action. The source for this discussion is primarily Brunner's *Dogmatics*.

Brunner begins the discussion of humanity as created by stating the obvious: "we are creatures."<sup>67</sup> Because we are creatures, argues Brunner, we belong to God. He asserts,

I am not independent and free, but I am a being who is derived from, and made for, God. This perception of what it means to be a 'creature' does not deny our freedom, but it springs from the fact that our freedom is founded in God, and is limited by this fact.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 53.

<sup>68</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 55.

Here, Brunner argues that we are both free and dependent. Human freedom originates from God because God created humanity. However, because God created humans, they depend upon him for that freedom and for their existence. He also alludes to human freedom being limited in some way, although Brunner does not elaborate on this limitation.<sup>69</sup>

Brunner then discusses what it means to image God and that a primary feature of bearing God's image is free will. In this discussion, he emphasizes the intention of God to have a reciprocal relationship with humanity. He writes, "He is the One who wills to have from me a free response to His love, a response which gives back love for love, a living echo, a living reflection of His glory."<sup>70</sup> In chapter three, it was noted that, for Brunner, God is primarily portrayed as love in scripture. If this were the case, then humanity would reflect this characteristic as humanity bears God's image. He writes,

God, who wills to glorify Himself and to impart Himself, wills man to be a creature who responds to His call of love with a grateful, responsive love. God wills to possess man as a free being. God wills a creature which is not only, like other creatures, a mere object of His will, as if it were a reflector of His glory as Creator. He desires from us an active and spontaneous response to our 'reflecting.'<sup>71</sup>

That is, since God desires creatures who freely love him, God created humanity with that capacity for freedom. Thus, a main characteristic of bearing God's image is self-

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<sup>69</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 55.

<sup>70</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 55.

<sup>71</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 55.

determination as a necessary condition of love. Brunner writes, “An automaton does not respond; an animal, in contradistinction from an automaton, may indeed *re-act*, but it cannot *re-spond*. It is not capable of speech, of free self-determination, it cannot stand at a distance from itself, and is therefore not *re-sponsible*.”<sup>72</sup> According to Brunner, God desires humanity to respond to God’s love freely.

However, this God-given freedom comes with limits. Brunner calls human freedom a responsible freedom. He argues,

Hence although man’s answer is free, it is also limited. God wills my freedom, it is true, because He wills to glorify Himself, and to give Himself. He wills my freedom in order to make this answer possible; my freedom is therefore, from the outset, a responsible one. Responsibility is *restricted* freedom, which distinguishes human from divine freedom; and it is a restriction which is also *free*—and this distinguishes our human limited freedom from that of the rest of creation.<sup>73</sup>

Brunner continues by suggesting that humanity was created to use this limited freedom, that is, to respond to God so that God may be glorified and so that God could also give himself to humanity.<sup>74</sup>

However, because humanity is *free*, the intent of this freedom may or may not be fulfilled. Brunner asserts that humans can reject their responsibility by not using their freedom properly, but they are still responsible for that rejection. Brunner writes, “the

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<sup>72</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 56.

<sup>73</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 56.

<sup>74</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 56.



actual existence of man—of every man, not only the man who believes in Christ—consists in the positive fact that he has been *made* to respond—to God.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, even in rejecting their responsibility humans have responded to God. Brunner makes a distinction between the formal and material aspect of humanity. The formal aspect has to do with humanity’s created faculties which are intended to image God, that is, to freely respond to God’s call of love. The material aspect has to do with humanity’s actual response or application of those faculties, either rejection of that call or an acceptance of the call.<sup>76</sup>

According to Brunner, the NT claims that humanity has rejected that call of a loving God, and that God actively seeks to restore humanity. He asserts,

The New Testament, in *its* doctrine of the *Imago Dei*, tells us that this right answer has not been given; that a quite different one has been given instead, in which the glory is not given to God, but to men and to creatures, in which man does not live in the love of God, but seeks himself.<sup>77</sup>

The NT, claims Brunner, also proclaims that God turns the false answer into a true answer. However, the redeeming action of God extends beyond this so-called “answer.” The redeeming action of God restores the image of God. For Brunner, the material aspect of the image of God was completely lost in the fall and is in need of restoration;

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<sup>75</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 57.

<sup>76</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 56-58.

<sup>77</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 58.

and by restoring the human response, God restores his image in humanity.<sup>78</sup> Thus, for Brunner, there is a strong connection between the intended use of human freedom and the image of God. The connection is so strong that when humans neglected that obligation to respond to God's love, the image of God (materially speaking) in humanity was lost.

Brunner argues that God's image is restored when human freedom is restored. That is not to say that humanity lacks "freedom" in the sense of "voluntary" after the fall. What it does mean is that the original intention of human freedom has been neglected. As a result of this negligence, humanity is unable to reflect God's love and hence God's image. Brunner writes,

Faith in Jesus Christ is therefore the *restauratio imaginis*, because He restores to us that existence in the Word of God which we had lost through sin. When man enters into the love of God revealed in Christ he becomes truly human. True human existence is existence in the love of God. Thus also the true freedom of man is complete dependence upon God.<sup>79</sup>

Here, Brunner appears to understand the relation between divine and human action in the context of love. God as Creator had certain purposes for humanity. However, those purposes were not fulfilled. Thus, God as Redeemer restores those purposes, that is, brings them about in order to bring God's intentions about. God's intends, according to Brunner, his creatures to love him and to have communion him. Here, we begin to see

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<sup>78</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 58.

<sup>79</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 58.

the theological background within which Brunner rejects divine concurrence and how he understands the relation between divine and human action.

What appears to be developing, then, is Brunner's view of how God relates to humanity as Creator and Redeemer, and his view on how best to understand the relation between divine and human action. Brunner writes, "The *Imago Dei*, in the sense of true humanity—not in the sense of formal or structural humanity—is thus identical with the true attitude of man in relation to God, in accordance with God's purpose in Creation."<sup>80</sup> The following nicely summarizes Brunner's line of reasoning up to this point. He states,

True humanity does not spring from the full development of human potentialities, but it arises through the reception, the perception, and the acceptance of the love of God, and it develops and is preserved by 'abiding' in communion with the God who reveals Himself as Love. Hence separation from God, sin, is the loss of the true human quality, and the destruction of the quality of 'being made in the Image of God'. When the heart of man no longer reflects the love of God, but himself and the world, he no longer bears the 'Image of God', which simply consists in the fact that God's love is reflected in the human heart.<sup>81</sup>

That is, God qua Creator intended humanity to image him, that is, to respond to God's love by loving God. Since human agents are intended to love God *freely*, God created human agents with the capacity to love God freely. And human agents are dependent upon God for that freedom. However, since humanity neglected that responsibility to love God, humanity also lost the material image of God. That is, materially speaking, humanity does not image or reflect God because humanity does not love God. God qua

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<sup>80</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 59.

<sup>81</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 59.

Redeemer restores human freedom and the image of God through Jesus Christ. Thus, God restores his original intention for creation, namely, to have communion with it.<sup>82</sup>

Brunner then spends some time discussing other elements of the image of God.<sup>83</sup> Not all of these elements contribute to our discussion of the relation between divine and human action. However, there are indications that even in these discussions Brunner is thinking about the relation between divine and human action.

For example, Brunner discusses the implications of humanity as male and female. In this discussion, he emphasizes the communal character of being created in the image of God. He writes,

Hence from the outset man has not been created as an isolated being, but as a 'twofold' being; and not simply as two human beings, but as two beings who necessarily belong to one another, who have been created for this purpose, and whose whole nature is ordered in this direction, that is, as two beings who cannot *be*, apart from each other.<sup>84</sup>

Although this does not indicate much about the relationship between divine and human action, Brunner's claim about the nature of human existence as communal is consistent with his claim that humanity was created to have communion with God. Just as God created humanity to love and to be loved, so God created humanity to love each other as well. Brunner writes, "Because God is Love, because in God's very Nature there is

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<sup>82</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 59.

<sup>83</sup> For example, Brunner discusses humanity as body and spirit, humanity as male and female, humanity as individuality, humanity as stewards of nature, and humanity as having an immortal soul.

<sup>84</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 64.

community, man must be able to love.”<sup>85</sup> Thus, Brunner argues, humanity must be created as a pair (i.e., male and female).

Even in Brunner’s discussion of humanity as individuality, he emphasizes the communal nature of the image of God. He writes, “Because men are unlike they need one another. Individuality is the natural presupposition of community; the natural fact that we need each other, is, so to speak, the natural form of community.”<sup>86</sup> It is unclear, from what Brunner wrote, how this applies to the concept of humanity in communion with God. What is clear, though, is that the concept of humanity as communal is a driving force behind Brunner’s doctrine of the image of God.

Earlier in this chapter, we looked at Brunner’s discussion of divine concurrence and concluded that he rejects it because it damages any sound conception of the relation between divine and human action. That is, the causal language, which is implicit in the concept of divine concurrence, renders discussion of the relation between divine and human action unintelligible. In fact, divine concurrence appears to put Brunner’s theological framework in jeopardy. The problematic nature of divine concurrence becomes even more explicit when one considers Brunner’s concept of the nature of humanity as free and communal. Brunner writes,

The creation of God, true human existence, is an act of God, which can only be completed in the answering act of man. Man has been so created that he must

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<sup>85</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 64.

<sup>86</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 66.

answer, whether he will or no, either by responding to or reacting against the divine will of the Creator.<sup>87</sup>

It is difficult to understand how this idea, as expressed by Brunner, would be compatible with a strong or maximal understanding of divine concurrence whereby God strongly acts alongside free human activity. Because of this, Brunner appears to understand the relation between divine and human action in the context of other claims about what God is like and what God does that, he thinks, avoids some of the problematic issues usually associated within this discussion.

### 3.5. Humanity as Sinner and the Consequences of Sin

For Brunner, in order to understand humanity properly and to understand God's activity we also need to understand the state of humanity in need of redemption. In the previous section, we examined Brunner's view of God's original purpose for humanity. In this section, we examine Brunner's view of humanity's reversal of God's original purpose. For Brunner, we properly understand God's redeeming activity when we understand the need of a redeemer.<sup>88</sup>

Brunner understands sin as rebellion, a rebellion from God's original purpose for humanity. He writes, "...in many passages in the Bible we come upon the idea that sin is

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<sup>87</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 73.

<sup>88</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 90.

a ‘falling-away’ from God, or rebellion.”<sup>89</sup> He continues by contending, “At the basis of this conception of sin [as rebellion] there is always the idea of an event which *reversed* something.”<sup>90</sup> What has been reversed? For Brunner, it has to do with what God has established in creation. He writes, “Sin is not the primary phenomenon, it is not the beginning, but it is the turning-away from the beginning, the abandonment of the origin, the break with that which God had given and established.”<sup>91</sup> This break, argues Brunner, breaks humanity’s relationship with God.

Sin, rebellion, responsibility, and freedom provide context for Brunner’s view on the relation between human and divine action. As mentioned earlier, the concept of communion between God and humanity is built upon freedom and responsibility. With freedom comes the responsibility to love God freely. But, sin is a rejection of that responsibility. Brunner states,

Sin is disobedience to God, and is due to distrust. Evil, understood as sin, is a change in man’s relation to God: it is the break in communion with God, due to distrust and defiance. The story of the Fall reveals the fundamental cause for this breach in communion: the desire to be ‘as God’. Man wants to be on a level with God, and in so doing to become independent of Him.<sup>92</sup>

Thus, humanity wants both freedom and independence. That is, for Brunner, humanity made the mistake of identifying freedom with independence. He writes, “Sin is throwing

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<sup>89</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 91.

<sup>90</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 91.

<sup>91</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 91.

<sup>92</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 92.

off restraint, denial of responsibility, hence emancipation from that which makes us responsible, in whose Word we have both our freedom and our bondage.”<sup>93</sup> Sin, then, is the desire for self-sovereignty and the denial of a sovereign God.

Furthermore, Brunner discusses the nature of sin as affecting the whole person, as universal, and as temporal. The most relevant idea for understanding divine action is the Pauline concept of the universality of sin found in Romans 5. Regarding this concept, Brunner writes, “From the standpoint of Christ as we look backwards we see Humanity as a ‘unity’ of sinners; when we look forward, from Christ, it is a unity of the redeemed—that is, in so far as they really are in Christ.”<sup>94</sup> Sin is really something that happened in human history just as redemption is something that happened in human history that affects the whole of history.

Brunner also discusses the concept of original sin and asserts his displeasure with the concept because of his notion of responsibility. He understands this concept to be one of biology and not of the Bible. Thus, he rejects this doctrine. He writes, “Where sin is mentioned, the human being is seen as the ‘person before God’; there he stands within the dimension of responsibility, of responsible personal existence.”<sup>95</sup> Brunner balks at the doctrine of original sin, then, because of his concept of responsibility. He would agree that all of humanity stands guilty before God. However, the biblical message is one of

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<sup>93</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 93.

<sup>94</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 99.

<sup>95</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 104.



individual responsibility before the Creator. Original sin, for Brunner, really has to do with the fact that Adam's descendants "are involved in death, because they themselves commit sin."<sup>96</sup> Obviously, Brunner is worried that the concept of original sin removes guilt from humanity. If original sin removes guilt, then sin is also removed. As he writes, "Sin and guilt are inseparable."<sup>97</sup>

The problem, then, is that humanity cannot remove guilt on their own and reestablish communion with God, so God must do the acting. Brunner claims,

Now this is the paradox of sin, that man can, it is true, 'do something about it' and thus he is guilty, but he cannot alter the fact that he is a sinner. Man is imprisoned in his own sin. He has become entangled in sin, so that he cannot get out. By the very fact of sinning he has become the slave of sin. By the fact of sinning he has put himself under the dominion of sin, which he now cannot shake off. He was able to close the door, but he cannot open it again. Sin is therefore responsible action, which closes the door to freedom—not to all freedom, but to the freedom of being no longer a sinner but a human being who is well-pleasing to God.<sup>98</sup>

Because of sin, humanity is no longer free to have communion with God. That is, humanity cannot, by itself, restore that relation. Brunner writes, "Once man has lost his true relation to God he cannot get back into the right relation because he has no right to do so."<sup>99</sup> Since humanity lost that "true relation to God" humanity has also lost its original purpose, which was to love God. Furthermore, humanity is unable to restore that

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<sup>96</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 104.

<sup>97</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 106.

<sup>98</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 106-107.

<sup>99</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 107.

original intention of God established at Creation. Thus, Brunner argues, the restoration of humanity to communion with God cannot be made by an act of humanity but only through an act of God.<sup>100</sup>

There are important consequences as a result of the break of communion with God. First, Brunner discusses the existence of humanity under the wrath of God. He argues,

To sinful man God is present as the Holy God, who allows the disobedient man to feel His resistance. The Bible calls this 'resistance' the Wrath of God. Instead of God attracting man, He now repels him; this is the negative form of the original love of God. As sinner—and this is his 'theological existence'—man stands under the wrath of God.<sup>101</sup>

The wrath of God is the result of humanity's apostasy, which was described earlier in this section. Brunner writes, "...if a person gives the wrong answer to the call of God, if he turns his back on the generous grace of God, by this act he loses his original freedom."<sup>102</sup> However, argues Brunner, not all human freedom has been lost. Humans are still moral beings, but they have lost their ability to live according to God's purpose. Nevertheless, God is not completely shut out of human existence.

Second, Brunner discusses the law of God as a consequence of the break of communion with God. In short, the law of God replaces God's presence with humanity.

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<sup>100</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 107.

<sup>101</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 118-119.

<sup>102</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 118.

That is, God is no longer directly related to humanity. The law now stands between God and humanity. He asserts, "If man had not yielded to this temptation, he would have lived in communion with God; he would have received life as a gift; daily he would have received it as a gift at the hands of God."<sup>103</sup> Because humanity yielded, argues Brunner, that direct relation is no more, and the law takes God's place.

Third, Brunner discusses the nature of human freedom and human bondage. He recognizes that freedom is key to understanding the nature of humanity and the nature of sin. He contends, "Those who do not understand human freedom, do not understand man. Those who do not understand the 'unfreedom' of man do not understand sin."<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, Brunner claims that the contemporary dangers of naturalism and pantheism make the concept of human freedom even more urgent.<sup>105</sup>

An essential element for understanding human freedom is the claim that because of sin, humanity has, in part, lost freedom. Brunner writes, "Through sin man has lost his original freedom. He is no longer free to realize his divine destiny, and to be good, as God would like him to be."<sup>106</sup> In addition, according to Brunner, with this loss of freedom also comes an inability to reverse this state of affairs. That is, we cannot redeem ourselves. He writes, "If we could do so, we would not need redemption. To see the necessity for redemption, and the impossibility of achieving it, comes to the same

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<sup>103</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 120.

<sup>104</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 121.

<sup>105</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 122.

<sup>106</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 122.

thing.”<sup>107</sup> For Brunner, we are no longer capable of loving God, and we are unable to fix our inability.

Brunner also states that we should avoid understanding the concept of ‘unfreedom’ in a deterministic sense. The sort of determinism Brunner has in mind removes guilt from humanity. According to Brunner, humanity still retains the status of a moral agent. He argues,

Rather we should always start from the fact that man never ceases to be subject. Thus even as sinner, man is not an animal but a responsible person. He still always possesses that quality which in the Old Testament...distinguishes him as ‘person’ from the animal: namely, all that is meant by ‘being made in the Image of God’, the quality which makes him, as person, like the divine Person.<sup>108</sup>

For Brunner, sin does not abate human responsibility. In fact, he claims, “the greater the sin, the more responsible and therefore the more guilty does man become.”<sup>109</sup> Brunner is concerned that if we remove human responsibility then we diminish the image of God in humanity and then also deny the seriousness of sin.<sup>110</sup>

What sort of freedom does humanity retain? Brunner could be clearer on this point, but he does state the following:

He is free to be a virtuous sinner, but he is not free not to be a sinner at all. He possesses freedom in the sense of a *libertas civilis*—not only freedom from

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<sup>107</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 122.

<sup>108</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 122.

<sup>109</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 123.

<sup>110</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 123.

compulsion, but creative and moral freedom, in so far as we eliminate from this freedom the element of true goodness, in the sense of real love to God and man.<sup>111</sup>

Thus, because of sin, humanity is unable to really love God and really love our neighbor. That is, humanity is not free to be truly good. For Brunner, true goodness, it seems, has to do with loving God and loving humanity. How one attempts to define human freedom, Brunner would argue, should be within these parameters.

Brunner's discussion of sin and fallen humanity sets up his discussion of redemption because it provides a theological background under which God's redemptive activity makes sense. Furthermore, it also explains the current state of affairs for humanity. Humanity has failed to live up to their responsibility and is in need of a redeemer.

### 3.6. Redemption

Following the concept of providence, Brunner begins his treatment of redemption, which is the subject of our final sub-section of section 3. This section will not examine the complete topic as Brunner has outlined. Rather, it will focus on the heart of his discussion, namely, the work of Christ.

To begin with, before Brunner examines the concept of redemption, he argues that God's redeeming activity is something that is historical. Just like the fall, redemption is something that actually takes place in history. He asserts,

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<sup>111</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 124.

What we believe as Christians, we believe because something particular has taken place in history. This 'particular thing' that has happened in history we call 'saving history' (*Heilsgeschichte*), or the history of salvation, or the history of revelation, or the historical revelation.<sup>112</sup>

Clearly, Brunner makes a distinction between history and salvation history. However, the distinction is not that one is true and the other mythological. Salvation history, for Brunner, takes place *in* history. That is, history is the larger category under which salvation history falls. Thus, redemption is real and particular; it is something that really takes place in the course of world history.

The perspective that salvation history takes place within world history is significant for Brunner because salvation is part of the unfolding work of God for all of humanity. Brunner writes, "Above all...the historicity of man is unmistakably expressed in the fact that he, man, that all nations, not merely Israel, move towards a goal which God has set for them, and towards which He leads them."<sup>113</sup> What is the goal that God has set for humanity? For Brunner, it is this: "Man has been created for community."<sup>114</sup> Again, the concept of communion dominates Brunner's thinking here. God intends for humanity to have communion with God and also with each other. So, God's work of redemption is intended to restore that communion.

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<sup>112</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 193.

<sup>113</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 196.

<sup>114</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 195.

In order to understand to God's work of redemption, though, we need to examine Brunner's discussion of the work of Christ. With regard to this topic, Brunner states,

Here Jesus Christ is contemplated in His action, or in God's operation through Him, in all that God does for us and in us through Jesus, in all that He gives us through Him, and has prepared for us through Him, not so much—as it *appears* at least in *John*, in His Hidden Being.<sup>115</sup>

That is, for Brunner, we can only understand the person of Jesus properly if we first consider his work. There is another point worth mentioning. Brunner makes it clear that the work of Christ can be considered God's work if it is for our benefit. What does this mean? It means that mundane actions of Jesus do not necessarily count as the redemptive activity of God, but that Jesus' atoning work does count as the redemptive activity of God. Could it be, though, that mundane actions of Jesus count as divine action? Unfortunately, Brunner does not address this issue.<sup>116</sup>

Brunner argues that the work of Christ in redemption is also the work of God in redemption. Brunner writes, "Jesus, as the Son of God, has authority to act in the place of God; He is the One to whom God transmits His whole power and His final authority."<sup>117</sup> His point is that the church first understands Jesus by his work. Brunner

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<sup>115</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 271.

<sup>116</sup> There are many Trinitarian issues with regard to divine action. Does an action of Jesus count as divine action? Is divine action only regarded as an action of the Godhead? I suspect that an action of one divine person counts as divine action very broadly. However, it seems difficult to think about divine action in a Trinitarian way despite Pannenberg's plea for Trinitarian thinking. Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 384-396.

<sup>117</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 272.

writes, “All this expresses the fact that Jesus is first of all understood by the Church through His work, His function, His significance for salvation.”<sup>118</sup>

Furthermore, Brunner argues that the offices of Christ (prophet, priest and king) also emphasize the action of God through Jesus.<sup>119</sup> Following Brunner, we will first examine Christ as Prophet, then Christ as Priest, and finally Christ as King.

The prophetic office of Christ does not only deal with the *content* of Jesus’ teaching. Brunner asserts that behind the prophetic office of Christ is also the concept of “Emmanuel.” He claims,

This...is a new state of revelation, and by its very nature, final and complete: here the Word and the Person are one: the Word is no longer a pointer to something beyond, but the ‘Word’ actually expresses the presence of that world beyond, for this is the category of ‘Emmanuel’—God Himself acting and speaking in the action and the speech of this Unique Person: Jesus.<sup>120</sup>

Thus, Brunner recognizes a distinction between prophets of the OT and Jesus as a prophet. Still, there *is* content in the teachings of Jesus. For Brunner, the teachings of Jesus mainly concern “the new demand for righteousness” and “forgiveness and the coming of the new age in its fullness as the gift of God.”<sup>121</sup>

The prophetic office of Christ also concerns the presence of God. On this point, Brunner continues to emphasize his contention that the redemptive actions of Jesus are

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<sup>118</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 273.

<sup>119</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 273.

<sup>120</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 276.

<sup>121</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 278.



also, at the same time, the redemptive actions of God. For Brunner, then, the prophetic office of Christ concerns the actual presence of God with humanity whereby God speaks, acts and forgives through Jesus.<sup>122</sup>

In addition, as already mentioned, there is content behind the prophetic office of Christ. Brunner writes,

Jesus teaches two things—both can only be rightly understood in reference to Himself: the new demand for righteousness, which is required of those who belong to the new age, and is the condition upon which they are able to share in His life; and forgiveness and the coming of the new age in its fullness as the gift of God.<sup>123</sup>

What Brunner refers to as “the new demand for righteousness” refers to the heart. God requires that humanity love him and one another. He writes, “[W]hat matters is the inner attitude, the relation of the heart to God and to our neighbour. God requires nothing but love; that is what all the commandments mean.”<sup>124</sup> For Brunner, love summarizes the content of Jesus’ teaching.

The priestly work of Christ is also, at the same time, the redemptive activity of God. Brunner claims that the priestly work of Christ, though, does not only concern the Cross. He writes, “The whole life of Jesus, including His teaching, is the Merciful God stretching out His hands to His rebellious, lost creation. The whole life of Jesus is the

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<sup>122</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 278.

<sup>123</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 278.

<sup>124</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 278.

self-giving of the Holy for sinful humanity.”<sup>125</sup> For Brunner, then, there appears to be some overlap between the offices of Christ.

With regard to both the priestly and prophetic office of Christ, Brunner argues, God restores the broken relation between humanity and God. Brunner contends,

All that Jesus does and all that He teaches is directed towards man, who is ‘lost’, not in order to judge him or to ‘lecture’ him, but in order to save him, to bring him back to God, in order that the broken fellowship between God and man may be restored.<sup>126</sup>

Again, all of this activity is intended to bring humanity back into fellowship with God. In order to bring about that fellowship with God, Jesus’ life eventually leads to his death and suffering on the Cross. However, Brunner understands the whole life and ministry of Christ as part of the redeeming activity of God and not just the Cross.<sup>127</sup>

Furthermore, Brunner considers the cross (i.e., the death of Christ) as a real event that has real consequences. When discussing the OT sacrificial system, Brunner writes, “[The Old Testament] contained the truth—still valid for us to-day—that sin is a reality, which can only be removed by a real event.”<sup>128</sup> He also writes, “The atoning sacrifice represents the truth that something must *happen*, if there is to be peace between God and

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<sup>125</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 281.

<sup>126</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 281.

<sup>127</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 282.

<sup>128</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 284.

man, if the communion which has been broken by sin is to be restored.”<sup>129</sup> For Brunner, the atonement appears to be conditioned on the phrase, “if there is to be peace between God and man.” That is, if communion is to be restored between God and humanity, then something must take place in order to restore that communion.

Brunner takes the condition a step further and calls the cross a mighty act of God and a necessary condition for communion with God. Following his discussion of various theories of atonement, he argues that the basic thrust of all of them is that through the cross communion is restored. He writes,

If man is to be brought back into contact with God, if he is to be able to receive the salvation which God has provided for him, then the Cross of Jesus Christ ‘*must*’ happen. It is the necessary condition for God’s reconciling work. It is only because the Cross ‘must be’, that what seems to be an unintelligible tragedy becomes a significant saving fact. The knowledge of such a necessity, of the feeling that ‘it could not be otherwise’, was identical with the knowledge that the death on the Cross was no accident, no thwarting of the divine plan of salvation, no frustration of the divine government of the world, but, on the contrary, was itself an integral part of the divine saving history.<sup>130</sup>

As a result of the Cross, then, a transformation takes place. The condition of humanity goes from separation from God to communion with God. In addition, if the transformation is to become a reality, then the Cross must happen. Brunner writes, “If that transformation is to be achieved then this death on the Cross must be, and indeed is an act of God; for the One who suffers is the one who is in all things empowered by God,

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<sup>129</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 284.

<sup>130</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 286.

One in whom God Himself is present and acting.”<sup>131</sup> This transformation which occurs as a result of God’s presence and activity, Brunner refers to as God’s “‘mighty act’ of Salvation.”<sup>132</sup>

A few pages later, Brunner reemphasizes the necessity of the atonement and God’s redemptive activity.<sup>133</sup> He again argues that only God can remove the separation between humanity and God. That is, reconciliation requires an action from God. He writes, “The separation can only be removed by God, and it must be removed, if there is to be a restoration of fellowship between man and God.”<sup>134</sup> Brunner adds that the removal must be a real act that matches the reality of the guilt. He writes, “This removal must be as real an act as the reality of guilt. An act of restoration must take place, if there is to be a real restoration, and this must be God’s doing.”<sup>135</sup> Here Brunner recognizes the necessity of God’s redemptive activity in order to restore God’s original intention of having communion with humanity. Brunner recognizes that God’s redemptive activity must be real and not fictional. He argues that fellowship with God would be impossible

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<sup>131</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 286-287.

<sup>132</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 287.

<sup>133</sup> Brunner makes a distinction between a priori and a posteriori necessity. For Brunner, the atonement is necessary, a posteriori. That is, only by looking back do we know that the Cross was necessary. There is no logical deduction that demonstrates the Cross is necessary (p. 296).

<sup>134</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 291.

<sup>135</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 291.

unless God intervened “in the human situation” and reconciled humanity’s relation to God.<sup>136</sup>

Brunner then turns to the royal office of Christ and argues that the heart of the royal office of Christ concerns the rule of God or the Kingdom of God. God desires to have his will done. Brunner then refers to the Lord’s Prayer where Jesus prays that “God’s will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”<sup>137</sup> At first glance, the royal office of Christ does not seem to fit into Brunner’s main theme of communion with God. However, when he defines salvation as it relates to the royal office of Christ, Brunner argues that salvation “consists in unity of will with, and personal communion between, God and man.”<sup>138</sup> Thus, even if there is tension between the concepts of communion and rule, Brunner still maintains the claim that God’s redemptive activity aims to restore the broken relation between humanity and God.

Brunner also addresses an apparent tension between God’s rule and God’s desire to have communion by arguing that Jesus inaugurates a new type of King. For Brunner, God does demand obedience, but “God’s rule” does not merely demand obedience. The royal work of Christ is also a gift. Brunner states,

The divine kingdom which Jesus inaugurates, is God’s liberating, restoring, forgiving presence, which creates communion. Here is One whom, because He is Holy Love incarnate, we can trust utterly, and whom we can love in return

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<sup>136</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 292.

<sup>137</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 298

<sup>138</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 298.

without losing ourselves. Hence the idea of the Rule or the Kingdom of God here gains new meaning. It is not the rule of One who in austere and royal majesty simply demands our obedience, but of One who, through his Holy Love, overcomes the resistance of the Evil One. It is the rule of One who pours out His life in loving service, who breaks down resistance by an inward victory.<sup>139</sup>

Jesus, then, appears to be a new type of King. His power is not one of sheer might but of reconciliation through the forgiveness of sins and by “re-creating” the human heart in order to make it willing to serve God.<sup>140</sup> Brunner states, “In faith in the atoning act of Jesus Christ on the Cross this self-determining ‘I’ is broken down, and in its place there comes the ‘I’ which accepts its life from the hands of God and dedicates himself to the service of God.”<sup>141</sup> The rule of Christ, for Brunner, refers to “free and generous love, and free obedience to God.”<sup>142</sup> That is, it has to do with the redemptive activity of God whereby God re-orientes the human heart, and humanity, in turn, responds with love towards God. A free and responsive love is the original intention of God for humanity at creation. This intention has now been restored through the atoning act of Christ.

In Brunner’s discussion of the redemptive activity of God, we again see the background within which he understands divine and human action. At the same time, Brunner makes sense of God’s activity in the world. Not only has his theology influenced how he understands divine concurrence, but it has also created room for divine

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<sup>139</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 299.

<sup>140</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 299.

<sup>141</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 300.

<sup>142</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 302.

action. If his theological framework is more or less true, then it simply makes sense that God would act in the world.

#### **4. Towards a Theology of Divine Action**

This chapter has helped make sense of the concept of divine action using the theological framework of Emil Brunner and implied that the concept of divine and human action should cohere with what God is like and what God actually does. The intention is not to replace the philosophical theology that is currently discussing this topic, but rather to supplement it with some fresh approaches. There is also an apologetic aspect of this model, even if indirectly so. If the basic model that Brunner provides in this chapter is more or less true, then belief in God's activity in the world is probably warranted.

For Brunner, God created humans so that they would be able to respond freely to God's free and generous love. However, humanity failed to live up to their responsibility and lost the ability to love God freely. Thus, in order to restore the original potential for communion, God qua redeemer acted through the work of Christ. The result is that, in faith, God restores the original intention of his creation by re-orienting the human heart so that humanity can freely respond to God's free love and also willingly obey and serve God.

With that said, Brunner has a strong sense of divine involvement and activity in the world. God preserves the existence of all things at all moments; God governs the

course of history toward his final end and goal; and God's preservation and government of creation extend not only to the workings of nature (as will be explored in more detail in the next chapter) but also to events brought about by free creatures.

The concept of divine concurrence explains 'how' God governs those events brought about by free human agents. For Brunner, since we are not in a position to know how it is that divine activity and human activity coincide, he does not pursue an answer. In fact, he thinks that the concept of divine concurrence is so problematic that he rejects it completely. Given his theological understanding of humanity as created, fallen, and redeemed, he cannot bring himself to endorse the concept of divine concurrence. Although God is sovereign and humanity is free, the fact that we do not know how both of these concepts are compatible is simply an interesting fact about us and does not count against the coherence of the concept of divine and human activity itself.

Brunner also leaves us with some boundaries. Again, he maintains that God preserves all things at all times, and God governs all things at all times toward his end. That is, God is Lord and Sovereign. In addition, he suggests that how we understand providence should be within the confines of human freedom, human responsibility, and God's desire to have communion with his creatures. For Brunner, Scripture's main contention is that God is actively restoring his original intention to have communion with his creatures and to re-orient their hearts so that they can freely respond to God's love. And the concept of divine concurrence, for Brunner, cannot stand against these boundaries. For Brunner, the language of causation and cooperation implicit within



concurrence rule out the possibility for free love and communion. Thus, Brunner's view of what God does and the purpose behind God's activity governs his view of divine and human action.

Perhaps scholars should consider this point of view when constructing their own concepts of divine and human action. Perhaps scholars should consider how their take on divine concurrence fits with other aspects of their theology. This is not to say that one particular view violates this way of thinking about divine and human action. What is being suggested is that thinking about divine and human action does not merely concern the concept of divine concurrence with human activity. Divine concurrence does not exist in a theological vacuum. Paul Helm and John Sanders appear to be sensitive to this concern, but perhaps others should follow suit. There are other relevant issues within theology that should come into consideration when making sense of divine and human action.

Brunner's thought on divine and human action demonstrates that there is a theological side to this issue. Investigating the relation between divine and human action needs to include aspects like God's work in creation and redemption, including God's work in creating humanity in his image and God's work in restoring humanity. Why? Because God's redemptive and creative work provides the content and purpose of the concept of divine action and also explains the extent and degree to which God's activity relates to human activity. Without it, the concept of divine action is incomplete.

## 5. Conclusion

The claim of this chapter is that understanding the relation between divine and human action can be aided by considering relevant theological issues such as God's work in creation and redemption. The current scholarship on this issue tends to focus only on the doctrine of divine concurrence. The result is that scholars are failing to consider other potentially relevant issues.

It was shown that Brunner has a strong view of providence, but that he also rejects the concept of divine concurrence because the degree of divine action is too strong. For Brunner, concurrence is problematic because it fails to coincide with his understanding of God's nature (as explored in chapter 3), and it fails to coincide with God's desire to have free and loving communion with humanity. His discussion of divine and human action, then, centers on the original creative work of God, the sinful activity of humanity, the redeeming work of God, and the re-orientation of the human will and heart. The result of God's work is that, in faith, the broken relation between God and humanity has been restored, and God's creatures are now able and willing to freely respond to God's love with love.

Based on this formulation, it is suggested that scholars should consider these issues when making sense of divine and human action. The implication is that a theory of divine and human action must also coincide with other aspects of theology.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DIVINE ACTION AND THE NATURAL ORDER

#### 1. Introduction

In 2009, a survey of the American public indicated that the majority of Americans believe in God, miracles, and the resurrection.<sup>1</sup> A 2003 survey of the American public suggested that even among the educated public, the majority of those surveyed still believe in God, miracles, the resurrection, the virgin birth and the devil.<sup>2</sup> For example, 64% of those with post-graduate degrees believe in the resurrection of Christ, and 60% believe in the virgin birth of Christ. The poll also indicates that the less education one has, the more likely one is to believe in God's activity. Nevertheless, high percentages of the American public believe that God intervenes in the course of human history.

Some results of the survey may be surprising (like the fact that 27% of non-Christians surveyed believe in the resurrection of Christ), and some of the results are predictable (like the fact that 96% of *Christians* surveyed believe in the resurrection of Christ). What's interesting about the surveys is that despite reported problems with the concept of divine action, the general public and continue to believe in God and that God is active in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Harris Poll*, "What People Do and Do Not Believe In," December 15, 2009 ([http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris\\_poll/pubs/Harris\\_Poll\\_2009\\_12\\_15.pdf](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/pubs/Harris_Poll_2009_12_15.pdf)).

<sup>2</sup> *The Harris Poll* #11, February 26, 2003 ([http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris\\_poll/index.asp?PID=359](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=359)).

However, despite the survey, some scholars maintain that the concept of divine action is problematic. This chapter explores one dimension, namely, the relation between divine action and the natural order. This chapter considers Brunner's thought in this regard, and it is argued that his thought on God's creative work and lordship helps make sense of the relation between divine action and natural processes. This relation does not preclude particular acts of God including special or extraordinary activities such as miracles and redemptive acts. Nor do natural processes preclude God from acting through the ordinary workings of nature. Thus, examining theological claims about what God is like and what God actually does form part of a coherent foundation for how to think properly about God's activity in the world. If this foundation is maintained, then it is hard to see how the concept of divine action, miracles, redemption, and providence are so problematic even for the modern scientific mind.

## 2. History of Scholarship

Some scholars have claimed that divine action and particularly special divine action is essential for Christian faith.<sup>3</sup> In his recent monograph, Nicholas Saunders concurs and makes a stronger claim by suggesting that Christian thought is essentially

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Christoph Schwöbel, *God: Action and Revelation* (Kampen: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1992), 23-24. Also, cf. Christoph Schwöbel, "Divine Agency and Providence," *Modern Theology* 3 no. 3 (1987): 225-244.

*dependent* on the concept that God is active in the world.<sup>4</sup> Presumably, if the concept of divine action is problematic, then so is the rest of Christian thought.

Thus, because of its fundamental character, Saunders concludes that “a coherent account of divine action is a theological necessity.”<sup>5</sup> Saunders then examines the theological claim that ‘God acts’ in the context of concerns raised by natural science. His conclusions are that we have yet to make coherent sense of divine action and that the contemporary approaches to this end are not as promising as some think.<sup>6</sup>

Accounts of divine action either express the notion of divine action to make it fit the claims of modern science or else scholars look for a scientific theory that just happens to fit the claim that God acts in the world.<sup>7</sup> The approach of Saunders is typical. The

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<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Saunders, *Divine Action and Modern Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Saunders, *Divine Action and Modern Science*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Saunders, *Divine Action and Modern Science*, 214. Saunders specifically examines chaos and quantum theories as cosmologies that some scholars think makes room for the concept of divine action in the context the scientific enterprise.

<sup>7</sup> For an example of the former, look at Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958) especially chapter 5. For examples of the latter, look at *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, eds. Robert J. Russell, Nancy Murphy, and C. J. Isham (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1999). *Zygon* also has a number of articles that address the issue of cosmology and divine action. Cf. Peter E. Hodgson, “God’s Action in the World: The Relevance of Quantum Mechanics,” *Zygon* 35, no. 3 (September 2000): 505-516; Nicholas T. Saunders, “Does God Cheat at Dice? Divine Action and Quantum Possibilities,” *Zygon* 35, no. 3 (September 2000): 517-544; Gregory R. Peterson, “God, Determinism, and Action: Perspectives from Physics,” *Zygon* 35, no. 4 (December 2000): 881-890; Thomas F. Tracy, “Divine Action and Quantum Theory,” *Zygon* 35, no. 4 (December 2000): 891-900; Keith Ward, “Divine Action in the World of Physics: Response to Nicholas Saunders,” *Zygon* 35, no. 4 (December 2000): 901-906.

claim that divine action is essential to Christian belief and doctrine seems clear. In addition, there is an opinion that modern science challenges the concept of divine action.<sup>8</sup>

Rudolf Bultmann, in his *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, claims that as a result of modern science we cannot make sense of divine action. He writes, “Indeed, I need to see the worldly events as linked by cause and effect not only as a scientific observer, but also in my daily living. In doing so,” Bultmann claims, “there remains no room for God’s working.”<sup>9</sup> The implication is that because of modern science we cannot make objective claims about God’s activity in the world despite the worldview of the biblical writers. Bultmann suggests that we talk about God’s activity in existential terms—“what He speaks here and now to me.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, because of modern science, Bultmann argues that we need restrict talk of divine action to existential or non-objective claims.

Robert J. Russell looks for a cosmology that fits the concept of divine action. Russell thinks that new theories of cosmology offer promise for talking about God’s activity in the world. Apparently, Russell agrees with the suggestion that some data of

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Langdon Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976); Gilkey, “Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language,” *The Journal of Religion* 41 (1961): 194-205; Gilkey, “The Concept of Providence in Contemporary Theology,” *The Journal of Religion* 43 (1963): 171-191; Philip Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997); Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 65.

<sup>10</sup> Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology*, 66. For a discussion and critique of Bultmann’s claims cf. Schubert M. Ogden, “What Sense Does It Make to Say, ‘God Acts in History?’”, *The Journal of Religion* 43 (1963): 1-19. Robert King argues that a deeper issue for Bultmann is God’s transcendence. King claims that, for Bultmann, we cannot make any objective claims about God because we are not in a position to verify those claims. For more on this issue cf. Robert King, *The Meaning of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973) especially chapter two through four.

modern science conflicts with the claim that God acts in history. Russell asserts that, until recently, the debate has focused on God's special activity within a closed, mechanical (Newtonian) universe.<sup>11</sup> Older scholarship has argued that in a closed system there is no room for God to perform miracles or to make sense of the claim that he does. However, Russell points out that because of new "open" trends in cosmology, physics, evolutionary and molecular biology, and psychology, there are more models available to theologians to conceive of divine action than previously imagined.<sup>12</sup> The implication is that because these "open" cosmologies are more flexible than closed cosmologies, there is more room for conceiving of and talking about divine action. Thus, these new theories, it is argued, are friendlier to the concept of divine action.

Philip Clayton argues that theologians must take modern scientific claims seriously because of potential conflicts between theology and science.<sup>13</sup> What "take modern science seriously" appears to mean is that theologians must take modern science

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<sup>11</sup> Robert J. Russell, "Does 'The God Who Acts' Really Act?" *Theology Today* 54 (April 1997): 43-65.

<sup>12</sup> Among the new models, he argues for something called "noninterventionist objective special divine action," Russell, "Does 'The God Who Acts' Really Act?," 51. For examples of some of these trends consult *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature*, ed. Russell et al.; *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, eds. Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger and Francisco J. Ayala (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1998); *Physics, Philosophy, and Theology: A Common Quest for Understanding*, eds. Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger and George V. Coyne (Vatican State City: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1988)

<sup>13</sup> Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 8. Also, cf. Philip Clayton, *Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008); Philip Clayton, "Natural Law and Divine Action: The Search for an Expanded Theory of Causation," *Zygon* 39 no. 3 (September 2004): 615-636; C. Stephen Evans, "On Taking God Seriously: Philosophy of Religion in the APA and AAR," in *God, Philosophy, and Academic Culture*, ed. William J. Wainwright (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1996).

into account when doing theology and also be “intellectually honest” with the possibility that the scientific data may conflict with theological claims.

Furthermore, given that theology must take modern science seriously, he writes, “two of the most urgent problems raised for theology by modern science are the problems of how to conceive of God’s relation to the world and how, *if at all*, to conceive of God’s agency in the world.”<sup>14</sup> He goes on to suggest that the *pre*-modern mind would not have problems with conceiving of God’s activity. However, he argues, the mindset of the *modern mind* has been changed by science and technology to such an extent that the concept of divine action is now problematic.<sup>15</sup>

Clayton explains what exactly it is about the *modern* mind that creates problems for making sense of God’s activity in the world. First, Clayton asserts what he does *not* mean by the modern mindset. He writes, “It is important to note that the mindset I am describing does not try to rule out divine action on metaphysical grounds; it is not a form of metaphysical naturalism.”<sup>16</sup> Here he is not making a metaphysical claim that God does not and cannot act. That is, the objection or problem with divine action is *not* a metaphysical objection that *necessarily* rules out the possibility of God’s activity. Second, he elaborates on what he *does* mean by the modern mindset. He writes, “Instead, it is a way of thinking or methodology deeply ingrained in our culture, educational

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<sup>14</sup> Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 9-10.

<sup>16</sup> Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 10.



system and habits of thought—a set of expectations that makes science as we know it possible at the same time that it makes traditional accounts of divine action problematic.”<sup>17</sup> So perhaps Clayton is referring here to some type of *methodological* and not metaphysical naturalism. That is, he seems to be suggesting that *methodological* naturalism creates problems for understanding divine action. The implication here is that methodological naturalism, which is so ingrained in the mindset of modern people, creates a culture of doubt or skepticism with regard to divine action. Thus, we are led to believe that because of the *way* modern people think about the world that *belief* in divine action is problematic.<sup>18</sup>

Because of the supposed problematic nature of modern belief in divine action, Clayton attempts to develop a position that does not abandon the agency of God and yet does not hold to “the full knowability of miracles in the traditional sense.”<sup>19</sup> The assumption is that the traditional understanding of divine action is simply unacceptable or

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<sup>17</sup> Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 11.

<sup>18</sup> Methodological naturalism is a controversial topic and cannot be treated at length in this dissertation. For a discussion of methodological naturalism, cf. Alvin Plantinga, “When Faith and Reason Clash: Evolution and the Bible,” *Christian Scholars Review* 11, no. 1 (1991): 8-32; Howard J. Van Till, “When Faith and Reason Cooperate,” *Christian Scholars Review* 11, no. 1 (1991): 33-45; Pattle Pun, “Response to Professor Plantinga,” *Christian Scholars Review* 11, no. 1 (1991): 46-54; Ernan McMullin, “Plantinga’s Defense of Special Creation,” *Christian Scholars Review* 11, no. 1 (1991): 55-79; Alvin Plantinga, “Evolution, Neutrality, and Antecedent Probability: A Reply to Van Till and McMullin,” *Christian Scholars Review* 11, no. 1 (1991): 80-109; Howard J. Van Till, “Is Special Creationism a Heresy,” *Christian Scholars Review* 12, no. 4 (1991): 380-395; Alvin Plantinga, “Science: Augustinian or Duhemian,” *Faith and Philosophy* 13, no. 3 (July 1996): 368-394; W. Christopher Stewart, “Religion and Science,” in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael J. Murray (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 11.

suspicious to modern people including, presumably, current theologians, philosophers and scientists.<sup>20</sup> The sense of his project, then, is that he is attempting to *make* belief in divine action more acceptable to the modern mind and to take the findings of contemporary science into account when doing theology.<sup>21</sup> By its very definition, his project has an apologetic nature.

Clayton does not identify any person or group in particular but makes it seem as if most people have a problem with divine action. There are people, no doubt, who object to the activity of God because they do not think God exists in the first place, but Clayton does not appear to have these people in mind. The methodological naturalism that Clayton has in mind has become such a part of our culture that people cannot help themselves; they cannot possibly make sense of God's activity in the world.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, there are some philosophers, scientists, and even theologians who think that the concept of divine action is problematic. But the fact that some scholars have problems with the concept of divine action should come as no surprise. At the same time,

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Maurice Wiles, *God's Action in the World* (London: SCM Press, 1986) and Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

<sup>21</sup> Clayton is not alone in his sentiments. John Polkinghorne has also communicated some misgivings with regard to the traditional understanding of God's ordinary and special activity in light of contemporary science. Cf. John Polkinghorne, *Science and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), *Science and Providence* (Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc., 1989), and *Science and Creation* (Boston: Shambhala Publications Inc., 1989). Also worth looking at is Arthur Peacocke's, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming—Natural and Divine* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1990), chapter 9.

<sup>22</sup> The idea that people cannot help but think this way about the world and thus preclude that divine action is impossible or else is a problematic concept is something that Plantinga calls a *force majeure* objection. The thrust of a *force majeure* is as follows: "There are potent historical forces that impose these ways of thinking on us; like it or not, we are blown about by these powerful winds of doctrine; we cannot help ourselves." (Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 403.)

this is hardly a reason to think that the concept of divine action actually *is* problematic. In fact, the majority of Christians, I think, have no problem at all conceiving of a God who sustains the cosmos, governs it according to his ordained plan, and interacts in states of affairs.

Frank B. Dilley's essay, "Does the 'God Who Acts' Really Act?," makes a claim similar to that of Clayton by arguing that the traditional view of a God who really and particularly acts in history is scientifically unsatisfactory.<sup>23</sup> The scientific issue, according to Dilley, has something to do with modern scientific sentiments, which, he thinks, is problematic for understanding divine action. For Dilley, if a view affirms that God does act in particular ways, then that view does not take the claims of modern science seriously. However, if a view does not affirm that God acts in particular ways, then the view is presumably too far from classical theism to be acceptable for most Christians.<sup>24</sup>

Dilley thinks that there is hope for the concept of divine action through either a change in the modern scientific mind or various naturalizing projects. He writes, "If the times can be reversed and men can think miraculously once again, then there is still a place for a God Who Acts."<sup>25</sup> If the times cannot be reversed, then the only hope is a view that understands God's activity in terms of universal actions and not special

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<sup>23</sup> Frank B. Dilley, "Does the 'God Who Acts' Really Act?" in *God's Activity in the World*, ed. Owen C. Thomas (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983).

<sup>24</sup> Dilley, "Does the 'God Who Acts' Really Act?," 51.

<sup>25</sup> Dilley, "Does the 'God Who Acts' Really Act?," 58.

actions.<sup>26</sup> Dilley adds that an alternative view of divine action, which may be more acceptable to the modern mind, is one “with one eye on Whitehead and the other on the Bible...”<sup>27</sup> Apparently, Clayton takes Dilley’s cue and picks up the task of integrating theology with the best that science has to offer in order to *make* Christian belief acceptable to the modern mind.

Clearly, this issue touches on the subject of religious epistemology. Again, Clayton is not making the claim that the concept of divine action is metaphysically impossible or false, but rather he is claiming that somehow the traditional concept of divine action is problematic, unacceptable, suspicious, or otherwise irrational to the modern mind. Thus, his project is to *make it* acceptable.<sup>28</sup> Even so, Clayton admits that he, for the most part, ignores key issues within religious epistemology, but he does address them briefly.<sup>29</sup>

Clayton surveys some recent scholarship on religious epistemology and, despite the claim of some scholars, he suggests that the burden of proof is on the theologian to

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<sup>26</sup> For an example of this view cf. Maurice Wiles, “Divine Action: Some Moral Considerations,” in *The God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations*, ed. Thomas F. Tracy (Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> Dilley, “Does the ‘God Who Acts’ Really Act?” 58.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. George I. Mavrodes, “Jerusalem and Athens Revisited,” in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, eds. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983). In his essay, Mavrodes outlines three typical responses to the question, “Is theistic belief...rational?” (192). The first response claims that it is rational just as it is. The second response is that theist belief can be made rational. And the third response is that it cannot be made rational (192-193). Clayton appears to fall into the second category.

<sup>29</sup> Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 70.

reconcile theological claims with scientific claims. Essentially, Clayton argues that the key issue is whether or not Christian belief is *true* and not whether it is *justified* or *rational*.<sup>30</sup> He admits that there may be occasions in which a particular theistic belief, say *x*, is properly basic. However, if *x* conflicts with a competing truth claim, say *y*, then *x* can and presumably needs to be questioned even if belief in *x* is properly basic.<sup>31</sup>

However, if the issue is that some scientific truth claim conflicts with some theistic truth claims, then we would expect to find a *de facto* objection to belief in divine action. That is, we would expect to find some competing truth claim, say *y*, which theology must address because it conflicts with the claim that God acts, say *x*. But it is not clear just what conflicts with theological claims about God's activity in the world.

Clayton's position is that the traditional concept of divine action, *x*, conflicts with some claim or belief in contemporary science, *y*, but he's not specific about the conflict. That is, in the modern mindset, there is a belief or set of beliefs, *y*, such that if you hold *y*, then divine action is unacceptable or suspicious. As a result, the Christian has to either (1) address *y* or (2) modify *x*. Thus, Clayton's project implies that the traditional concept

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<sup>30</sup> Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 74. Here, Clayton refers to the work of Mark McLeod, *Rationality and Theistic Belief: An Essay on Reformed Epistemology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) and Keith Parsons, *God and the Burden of Proof: Plantinga, Swinburne and the Analytic Defense of Theism* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989).

<sup>31</sup> Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 77. My thoughts on religious epistemology have primarily been shaped by Alvin Plantinga. Cf. his *God and Other Minds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967), *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, eds. Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, and more recently, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

of divine action is unacceptable, and so he modifies the concept of divine action to make it acceptable or less suspicious to the modern mind.

Clayton is not clear about the exact conflict. He does argue that theological truth claims need to engage with scientific truth claims.<sup>32</sup> This is fair enough, but it is not clear why Clayton accepts the modern mindset that renders the concept of divine action problematic. Nor is it clear what in the modern mind conflicts with the concept of divine action. If it is not clear what the problem is, then perhaps the burden of proof does not rest on the theist. Perhaps one could engage the modern mindset by challenging the truth claims of science. Surely, theists should address reasonable objections to their beliefs, but it is not clear what the objection is here. More importantly, there does not seem to be a clear reason as to why theists must develop an alternative model of divine action if it is not exactly clear what is so problematic about the traditional concept of divine action.

If the issue is that the concept of divine action is unacceptable to the modern mind and if a *de facto* objection cannot be found, then perhaps the issue *is* epistemological. Clayton has simply not made the case that there is in fact a persuasive *de facto* objection to the traditional understandings of divine action. Because of the widespread epistemological issues that people have with regard to the concept of divine action, perhaps it becomes a *de facto* objection. But if it is not clear what the *de facto* objection to divine action is, then it is not clear why an alternative model of divine action is

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<sup>32</sup> Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 78.

required to *make sense* of divine action.<sup>33</sup> Because of this gap in Clayton's project, his motivation for developing an alternative model of divine action rests on a flaw and his argument lacks force.

In *Science and Providence*, John Polkinghorne addresses the issue of understanding providence in the context of contemporary science and argues that the modern mindset is the problem. His opening chapter is dedicated to stating the problem. Polkinghorne wonders, "Will the very laws of nature, thought in their rational beauty to testify to his existence, so prescribe cosmic history that God is left with no room for activity within it?"<sup>34</sup> He adds the following: "The advance of science certainly seems to have had the effect in the common mind of diminishing our expectations of God's action."<sup>35</sup> Again, the sense here is that contemporary science has done *something* to the modern mind that makes it difficult to understand or accept divine action.

Polkinghorne rejects a variety of solutions that make sense of divine action for the modern mind. For example, he rejects a solution which understands God's activity in terms of a single act. He is not satisfied with a deistic understanding of God's activity, whereby God merely upholds and sustains the natural workings of the cosmic order.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Clayton makes repeated claims that pantheism is more coherent than some versions of classical Western theism, especially in chapter 4. Yet, again, he does not say exactly why this is the case. Clayton, *God and Contemporary Science*, 82-124.

<sup>34</sup> Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence*, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence*, 5.

<sup>36</sup> Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence*, 10.

The question remains, though, how could it be that God acts? Polkinghorne claims that not every theist attempts to answer this question. The fideist and the existentialist refuse to answer it.<sup>37</sup> Polkinghorne does not accept those approaches because he maintains that we need to take the unity of knowledge seriously and do our best to “integrate the scientific and theological pictures of the world.”<sup>38</sup> Again, we are told to take the findings of modern science seriously.

Even so, Polkinghorne is optimistic about our ability to understand divine action. He suggests that contemporary cosmologies “point to an openness and flexibility within physical process.”<sup>39</sup> These new developments in science, he argues, aids us in understanding how it is that we can act in the physical universe but also, more importantly, how God acts in the physical universe. He admits, though, that these new developments do not solve all our problems. The *nature* and *location* of God’s activity are still problematic even though contemporary cosmologies are friendlier to the concept of divine action.<sup>40</sup>

Polkinghorne’s confession is telling because he thinks that science should be able to tell us something about the nature and location of God’s activity. He implies that the *nature* and *location* of God’s activity are problematic for any given cosmology. But he

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<sup>37</sup> Polkinghorne claims that Martin Gardner and Rudolf Bultmann fall into this category.

<sup>38</sup> Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence*, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence*, 13.

<sup>40</sup> Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence*, 13.



seems to suggest that the newer cosmologies are less problematic. More importantly, Polkinghorne's confession tells us something about the problem. He admits that we cannot empirically verify theistic claims, but we should be able to determine that the theistic model of the world is more accurate than the atheistic model of the world.<sup>41</sup>

However, it is complicated to affirm that God somehow interferes or intervenes in the natural order because science cannot describe or locate those events. For Polkinghorne, it is uncomplicated to affirm that God is busy sustaining the world according to how he made it because this is in harmony with the claims of modern science. But claiming that God performs miracles and acts in special ways is problematic given what we already know about the natural order. That is, the problem is how to understand God's activity in such a way that does not violate the ordinary workings of nature.

Still, some argue that there is no problem at all or that new theories do not give the concept of divine action more of an advantage.<sup>42</sup> That is, some argue that there is no need to modify our concept of divine action because of claims made by modern science, and some argue that there is no need to look for a sympathetic theory of cosmology in

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<sup>41</sup> Polkinghorne, *Science and Providence*, 16-17.

<sup>42</sup> In this section, I am heavily indebted to Alvin Plantinga, Richard Otte, and William Alston. Alvin Plantinga, "Divine Action: Is Divine Action a Problem?," (unpublished paper, 2002); William P. Alston, "Divine Action, Human Freedom, and the Laws of Nature," *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature*, eds. Robert J. Russell, Nancey Murphy, and C. J. Isham (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1999), Richard Otte, "Religion and Empirical Science," or "Divine Action and Empirical Science," (unpublished paper, 2001). There are two titles for Otte's paper.

order to rescue divine action from obscurity. These arguments are grounded on particular definitions of natural laws and on the aim of science.

To see this approach, consider Plantinga's argument on divine action. Plantinga claims that if natural laws are *properly* conceived, then there *is* no problem for understanding God's activity. He writes, "Science...tells us how the world works when God is treating the things he has made the way he ordinarily treats them; it makes no assertions about how things go when God treats things differently."<sup>43</sup> According to Plantinga, the scope of science does not cover out-of-the-ordinary events. Plantinga then applies this understanding of the scope of science to the nature of natural laws. He suggests that natural laws are simply descriptions of the normal sustaining activity of God and that they say nothing of God's special activity nor do they necessarily rule out God's special activity.

Otte also argues that in order to see the issue clearly, we should outline the role and aim of science. He writes,

Both providence and miracles are acts of God, but when God performs a miracle he brings about a result that is different than it would have been had God continued to providentially uphold the world the way he normally does. So a miracle is a case in which God decides to act in a special way that is different from the way he normally acts.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Plantinga, "Divine Action," 7.

<sup>44</sup> Otte, "Divine Action and Empirical Science," 7.

The distinction between how God normally acts and God's special activity is key to understanding Otte's and Plantinga's claim. Otte suggests that the aim of science is to describe God's ordinary activity and not God's special activity. Thus, attempting to locate and describe the nature of God's special activity falls outside the scope of science. Furthermore, if the aim of science is merely to describe the natural order (and not special divine activity), then it is hard to see how contemporary cosmologies offer promise in understanding the nature and location of divine action.<sup>45</sup> Under this view, natural laws function as descriptions of how things normally happen and not as prescriptions describing how things must always happen.

In *Miracles*, Lewis makes a similar argument by suggesting that science describes nature, and nature is only part of reality. He writes,

A miracle is emphatically not an event without cause or without result. Its cause is the activity of God: its results follow according to Natural law. In the forward direction (i.e. during the time which follows its occurrence) it is interlocked with all Nature just like any other event. Its peculiarity is that it is not in that way interlocked backwards, interlocked with the previous history of Nature. And this is what some people find intolerable. The reasons they find it intolerable is that they start by taking Nature to be the whole of reality.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> For a full discussion on the irrelevance of contemporary cosmologies, cf. William P. Alston's, "Divine Action, Human Freedom, and the Laws of Nature." In addition, for a discussion on the ontological status of natural laws, cf. William R. Stoeger, "Contemporary Physics and the Ontological Status of the Laws of Nature," *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature*, eds. Robert J. Russell, Nancey Murphy, and C. J. Isham (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, 1999). Essentially, Stoeger argues the following: "[Natural laws] are imperfect abstract descriptions of physical phenomena, not prescriptions dictating or enforcing behavior" (208).

<sup>46</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1960), 60.

Lewis also describes miracles as interruptions of the usual course of nature. However, understanding miracles as interruptions does not imply that they are inconsistent with reality. In fact, Lewis asserts that miracles have a deep level of consistency because they connect with the Creator of nature.<sup>47</sup>

The arguments of Plantinga, Otte and Lewis seem to have weight. If natural laws are merely descriptive of natural events, and if the scope of science is restricted to the natural world and not all of reality, then it is difficult to determine just how they cause conceptual difficulties for the concept of divine action. But I would also like to explore some theological grounds for this way of thinking. The next section will explore Brunner's theological claims about what God is like and what God actually does for the purpose of exploring the basic intuition that the concept of divine action is unproblematic even in the context of contemporary science.

### **3. Theological Contribution of Brunner**

#### **3.1. The Creator and His Creation**

Brunner's chapter on "The Creator and His Creation" concerns the relation of God and the cosmos. We will explore Brunner's thought on the relation between God and God's creation. After the examination of Brunner's thought, we will begin to have

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<sup>47</sup> Lewis, *Miracles*, 61-62.

an idea as to why we should think that the concept of divine action in the cosmos is relatively unproblematic.

From the beginning, Brunner asserts that God and the world are distinct and that this maintains God's authority over the world. He writes,

We are to think of God as the God who is 'there', apart from the world, who indeed Himself posits the world, to whom the world is not His *alter ego*: and when we think of the world we must think of it as something which does not naturally, essentially, and eternally, belong to God, but as something which only exists because it has been created by God. If it were otherwise, God would not be the *Lord* of the world at all, but, so to speak, its double.<sup>48</sup>

Brunner is not merely rejecting pantheism or panentheism. He is stating his commitment to the belief that God is Lord, which he maintained when discussing the nature of God in volume one of his *Dogmatics*.<sup>49</sup> What does the knowledge that 'God is Lord' mean? We will have to take a closer look at Brunner's thought in order to answer that question.

Brunner claims that God is not the Lord of creation simply because God created the cosmos but also because of the manner in which God created the cosmos and because of God's purpose for creation. He writes, "Not only the fact of the existence of the world, but all that is included in the fact of creation—the manner of creation and its purpose—is rooted in His Will as Creator, as that which precedes and establishes it."<sup>50</sup> For Brunner,

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<sup>48</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1952), 4.

<sup>49</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950), 137-150.

<sup>50</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 4.

the idea that God had a purpose for creation before the cosmos was brought about demonstrates that God is Lord of it. He writes, “We would have failed to give the phrase ‘the created universe’ its Biblical content, unless we had already dealt with the fact that the world is ‘rooted and grounded’ in the nature of God, as Lord, and in His Will as Creator.”<sup>51</sup> The idea that God is Lord of creation, that is, that God had a plan for the cosmos and established that plan according to his own will before the cosmos was brought about by God seems to be a defensible position.

Brunner appears to stress the purpose and end of creation over the manner and fact of creation. That is, the doctrine of creation does not concern how the world came about or that the world was brought about. It has to do with God’s purpose for creation and to what end creation was brought about.<sup>52</sup>

Brunner appeals to John 1 in order to examine the purpose and end of creation. He writes, “Here the Word which became flesh in Jesus Christ, and the Word of Creation, are one. In this Word of Creation the eternal decree, and in it also the purpose and meaning of all existence become plain.”<sup>53</sup> This is a curious statement by Brunner. He identifies rightly John 1 with the doctrine of creation. However, it is not clear how John 1 demonstrates the purpose and meaning of all things.

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<sup>51</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 4-5.

<sup>52</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 7.

<sup>53</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 8.

Brunner also suggests that knowing God as Creator involves knowing that God is lord and sovereign.<sup>54</sup> In fact, he emphasizes a point made in volume one of his *Dogmatics* that we first know God *qua* Lord before we know him *qua* Creator. What Brunner may have in mind, then, is that the incarnation demonstrates that God is in fact Lord over creation. That is, it is through the incarnation, through the word becoming flesh, that we know God and not through the brute fact of creation. Thus, the doctrine of creation primarily has to do with God's purpose for and end of creation.

What exactly does this approach to the doctrine of creation tell us? For Brunner, it has to do with the following: "I am the Lord thy God", the Creator; this means: 'Thou art My property'."<sup>55</sup> Admittedly, the concept of property has some negative connotations. However, for Brunner, the idea that God owns us has to do with God *qua* Lord. He writes, "For the fact that man belongs to God implies the whole truth of responsibility and of all moral obligation. In Jesus Christ we meet Him who addresses us as absolute Lord, and therefore as the Creator of all things: 'I, thy Lord, the Creator.'"<sup>56</sup>

In addition, the idea that God is Lord over creation implies something else, namely, that the cosmos is dependent on God and that God is not dependent on the cosmos. He writes, "For the idea of Creation means that I, together with the whole of Nature to which I belong, am absolutely dependent upon God, while He, on the other

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<sup>54</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 9.

<sup>56</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 9.

hand, is dependent neither upon me nor upon it.”<sup>57</sup> Thus, Brunner stresses that creation has a purpose and end, which is being carried out by the will of God, and that creation is dependent on God, presumably not only for its existence but also for its consummation, that is, for the process of bringing about its purpose.<sup>58</sup>

Brunner argues that in order to understand creation properly, we should understand it in the context of God’s Lordship. That is, the existence of creation is not merely a brute fact. The existence of creation points to God’s Lordship. Certainly, scripture assumes the existence of the world, Brunner would argue, but the objective of scripture is to point out that the purpose of creation is being brought about by God. The bringing about of the aim or goal or purpose for creation demonstrates that God is lord over creation.

The concept of God as Lord over creation is also behind the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*. He writes, “The truth that God is the One who determines all things and is determined by none, is the precise meaning of the idea of Creation as *creatio ex nihilo*.”<sup>59</sup> Brunner wants to establish that the world was brought about by God and God alone, and that because God brought the world about, then God alone determines “all things.”<sup>60</sup> Brunner asserts,

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<sup>57</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> It is not clear what Brunner means by “purpose” or “end.” Are they the same time? Is God’s purpose for creation whatever its end is?

<sup>59</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 9.

<sup>60</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 10.



God is the One who absolutely determines all things, and is determined by none. He is conditioned by nothing, therefore, not even by a 'Nothing'. Were He to be thus conditioned He would not be Creator, but simply a demiurge. All that existed 'before' all creation was God and His Word. The Creation has its foundation and its origin in God alone.<sup>61</sup>

It is not immediately clear what "all things" refers to in this quote. In the context of *creation ex nihilo*, it probably refers to the existence of things. That is, God is the creator of all things. Thus, God did not use something which already existed to bring about the cosmos, but rather God brought about the cosmos from literally nothing.

Brunner argues God's power explains that God was able to bring creation about, but love explains God's purpose for the cosmos. He writes, "Creation by the Word is not only to be understood in an instrumental sense: God speaks, and it is done; it is also final. The Word by which, or in which, God creates the world is at the same time His plan for Creation, its meaning and its goal."<sup>62</sup> The Word of God, then, is not merely an instrument by which God created the world, but it is also connected to the purpose for which God created the world. God's power provides sufficient reason for the fact that creation exists, but it does not supply the purpose. Love is the reason why God creates. He claims,

The Creation is the work of the Divine Omnipotence. But it is not only the work of His Omnipotence but also of His Holy Love. God creates the world in absolute

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<sup>61</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 10.

<sup>62</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 13.

freedom, it is true, but there is nothing arbitrary about His action. His freedom is identical with His Love. God creates the world because He wills to communicate Himself, because He wishes to have something 'over against' Himself. As the Holy God He wills to glorify Himself in His Creation; as the loving God He wills to give Himself to others. His self-glorification, however, is in the last resort the same as His self-communication. He wills so to glorify Himself that which He gives is received in freedom, and rendered back to Him again: His love. Hence the revelation of the purpose of His Creation, and this purpose of creation is the reason why He posits a creation. The love of God is the *causa finalis* of the Creation. In Jesus Christ this ideal reason for the Creation is revealed.<sup>63</sup>

The concept of divine omnipotence provides enough reason as to how God created the world. However, God's raw power does not explain why creation exists. It explains how God was able to bring the cosmos about. Love explains why God wanted to bring creation about.

Through the concept of love, we also come back to Brunner's discussion of the relation between divine and human action, but the concept of love also factors into the relation between God and the world. In the previous chapter, we explored the idea that God desires to have loving and voluntary communion with humanity. Love, then, is a key concept to understanding how God's activity relates to our activity. In the context of God's relation to creation in general, the concept of love remains. He asserts,

But the Christian idea means: that the purpose of the world is in God: that in it God wills His Glory; in it He wills to rule; and in it He wills to bring man—through His self-manifestation—into fellowship with Himself. The purpose, and therefore the fundamental meaning of the Creation, is the Kingdom of God. It is

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<sup>63</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 13.

only from this point of view that we can understand what the world is, as Creation; and this purpose is revealed in Jesus Christ.”<sup>64</sup>

So however we understand the nature of the world, we only understand it properly in the context of God’s love. Missing God’s purpose for creation, that is, in creating a community (i.e., a Kingdom of God) that freely and lovingly fellowships with him, ignores a key element in understanding creation.

Furthermore, Brunner explores the notion of time in the context of creation and argues that the world had a beginning and so time had a beginning. He writes, “In positing the world God also posits Time. Just as He posits Space so also He posits Time. Time and Space are the fundamental constituents of the world as posited by God. This, however, means that Time and Space are finite, not infinite. We are not thinking here of Time and Space as conceptual but as they actually are.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, just like everything else in creation, time and space are dependent on God.

The idea that God posits time and space seems significant because since time and space are created, they are also finite, and since time and space are finite, they also have a certain ontological status. Brunner appears to be suggesting that they are not necessary. That is, time and space could be otherwise. Brunner’s comment implies that since all things are created by God, then all things brought about by God are finite. However, it is

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<sup>64</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 14.

<sup>65</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 15.

not clear if Brunner is talking about the nature of truth, logical laws or numbers, but he is certainly talking about the actual world, about space and time.

Brunner clarifies what he means by the statement, “God created *this* world.”

What does *this* refer to? He states,

Apart from the evil in men’s hearts, and in their actions, everything in the world is God’s creation: the course of the stars, the changing seasons, the form and the life of plants and animals—even of wild animals—the human body in its relation to the soul, the series of human generations, birth and death—all this is, as it is, and takes place in this way, because, and as, God has appointed it, from the standpoint of His creation.”<sup>66</sup>

Brunner states that in the NT the view is that God has structured the world, the world of nature and all of the events of nature. They all have been created by God. As such, it would seem that all of these things are finite and could be otherwise.

Brunner’s concept of the world’s structure is hierarchical. Humanity, he argues, is the zenith of creation.<sup>67</sup> He writes, “The story of Creation in the Old Testament lays emphasis upon the fact that God has placed man in a world of nature with a great many aspects, which...finally reaches its zenith in Man.”<sup>68</sup> God desires a free and loving response from humanity, not from the other forms of existence in nature. Brunner argues,

Yes, indeed, this is precisely the ultimate, and the real meaning of the divine Creation of the world. In the full sense of the word, God can only glorify Himself

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<sup>66</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 18.

<sup>67</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 20-21.

<sup>68</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 21.

and impart Himself where a creature in freedom gives His word back to Him, *the* Word which He addresses to it, the word of love. Now we begin to see what a large measure of self-limitation He has imposed upon Himself, and how far He has emptied Himself, in order to realize this aim, to achieve it, indeed in a creature which has misused its creaturely freedom to such an extent as to defy God. The κένωσις, which reaches its paradoxical climax in the Cross of Christ, began with the Creation of the world.<sup>69</sup>

Here, more than anywhere else in this section, Brunner ties in God's purpose for humanity, divine self-limitation, the nature of creation, and the cross of Christ. Brunner wants us to take God's self-limitation seriously. He wants us to understand why God created the cosmos. And he also wants us to know that all of this began at creation. God is bringing about his purposes in the created world.

In anticipation of possible objections, Brunner also suggests that creation has a degree of independence from God, and, yet, not an absolute independence. In this context, he discusses the order of creation. He writes, "God has given to that which has been created—to *all* that has been created—a certain definite order which, because it has been created by Him, is the expression of His will."<sup>70</sup> Thus, forces of nature are reflections of God's will even though these processes have a certain level of independence.

The orders of creation, though, do not remove the fact that God has ordered them accordingly, that these forces are a reflection of God's activity, and that orderliness of

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<sup>69</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 20.

<sup>70</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 24.



creation, which reflects God's will, grounds the possibility for human knowledge of creation and God. That is, the orders of creation, the workings of the created order, are ultimately dependent upon God. He writes,

What we call the 'laws of nature' are God's orders of creation. This, and this only, is the way in which God has ordered the world. God is a God of order, not of disorder; He works according to law and not in an arbitrary manner. It is true that with this idea we enter a sphere where religious truth and natural knowledge—for instance, scientific knowledge—interpenetrate one another, and here we need to speak very carefully. But the fundamental idea, that there are constants in nature which have been created by God, lies outside the sphere of controversy, and is not disputed by anyone who has any respect for the truth of the Bible.<sup>71</sup>

The laws of nature are dependent upon God. What this means is that the laws of nature are a reflection of God's will, and thus they do not exist or work (i.e., come about, function, happen) apart from God's will. For this reason, Brunner thinks that there is a natural theology. As long as the observer has her mind on Christ, then there can be a genuine Christian natural theology.<sup>72</sup> In fact, since God is a God of order, Brunner argues, we would expect things to happen in an orderly fashion. In a sense, we would almost expect creation to behave in an orderly fashion because God is orderly.

Brunner also considers the epistemic effects of sin and suggests that a distinction be made between our ability to know God and our ability to know the world. He writes, "Sin does not hinder men from knowing the things of the world, the laws of nature, the

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<sup>71</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 25.

<sup>72</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 25.

facts of nature, and man in his natural, historical and cultural manifestations.<sup>73</sup> However, when it comes to religious and moral areas, human knowledge is very much flawed. He writes, “But the more we are dealing with the inner nature of man, with his attitude to God, and the way in which he is determined by God, it is evident that this sinful illusion becomes increasingly dominant.”<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, Brunner is optimistic with regard to actual knowledge of the world without the aid of biblical revelation. The more knowledge has to do with ethics and religion, the more sin will affect that particular knowledge.

Brunner then argues that knowledge of the world and knowledge of God do not necessarily conflict. He claims that theology has often made the mistake of confusing the biblical picture of the cosmos with what he calls revelation. He writes, “For centuries, Christian theology has been greatly to blame for the fact that it conceived the Biblical picture of the world, which in essentials is simply that of the Ancient World, as the content of the divine revelation. This made the Bible the infallible textbook of natural science and historical science.”<sup>75</sup> Thus, Brunner wants to make a distinction between the source of theology and the source of science.

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<sup>73</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 27.

<sup>74</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 27.

<sup>75</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 28.



And even though Brunner wants to maintain a distinction between our ability to know God and the world, he also argues that the two types of knowledge are unified through the will of God. Brunner argues,

The unity is given to us in the idea that just as the world is based upon the Creator-Logos, so also our natural knowledge, in all its activities, ultimately presupposes the Creator-Logos. Even natural knowledge, which is acquired through the senses and the intellect, is not simply something 'profane'; in so far as it wills and grasps Truth, it is something sacred. Valid knowledge is based upon a principle and a criterion of validity which is not simply a fact of the world, but is of divine character.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, the knowledge (say, of natural laws) gained through nature is based on God's will and God's truth. That is, knowledge of the world and scientific knowledge are based on the assumption that God created the cosmos in such a way that knowledge of it is both accessible and reliable. He writes, "Just as God has created a world which is not Himself but a second entity, over against Himself, so also has He given to man, as a human being, a reason which is capable of understanding what is in the world."<sup>77</sup> And whether the knower or the scientist realizes it or not, the content of knowledge from the natural world is of God's will for the cosmos. Thus, there is no necessary conflict between science and religion since both ways of knowing have their source in God's will.<sup>78</sup> That is, where

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<sup>76</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 29.

<sup>77</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 30.

<sup>78</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 30.

scientific theories and models are not in conflict with the truth claims of Scripture, the believer may hold the claims of science without fear of contradiction.<sup>79</sup>

Brunner also points out a theological problem, namely, the concept of *creatio continua*.<sup>80</sup> He claims that the danger of pantheism is in the background when we confuse the concept of preservation and creation. He writes, “For anyone who does not admit the distinction between the creation and the preservation of the created world does not take the fact of creation seriously.”<sup>81</sup> Simply put, God does not relate to the created world in the same way that God relates to the un-actualized world. Brunner clarifies:

Henceforth, through the action of God it has an independent existence, even though this independence be a limited one. It depends on a divine thread of preservation above the abyss of nothingness; at any moment God can let it fall into nothingness. But to preserve that which has been created does not mean continually to create it anew; to claim this would mean that it has an actual existence for God, that it has an existence of its own.<sup>82</sup>

However, Brunner does want to maintain that “God is still actively and creatively working” in the cosmos. He writes, “Now the recognition of a divine preservation of the world, as distinct from His creation, does not exclude the truth that God is still actively

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<sup>79</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 31-33. Brunner uses the account of creation as an example. He makes a distinction between the narrative and the truth of the biblical claim. The narrative of Genesis is charged with an Ancient Near Eastern worldview and metaphysic. Modern science can and should challenge this metaphysic. Yet, the truth of the biblical claim is not in conflict with the claims of modern science. Thus, there is no obligation of the believer to abandon those beliefs.

<sup>80</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 33.

<sup>81</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 33-34.

<sup>82</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 34.

and creatively at work in a world which He has already created, and which He preserves.”<sup>83</sup> He also asserts that God is continually creating things afresh in creation.<sup>84</sup>

So far, Brunner’s claims about God’s work in creation, God’s intentions in creation the cosmos, and God’s lordship over the cosmos help to make sense of the nature of God’s activity. Fundamentally, God has a purpose for the world that he brought about, and this purpose was pre-established. That is to say, God’s plan for creation was preconceived before creation was brought about. Furthermore, when the concept of God’s plan for creation is coupled with the idea that God has the ability to bring his plan about, then the concept of God as Lord is incorporated. How does God relate to the world? God relates to the world as Lord. For Brunner, it would be a mistake to begin with the mere existence of the world and then attempt to determine God’s relation to it. More accurately, we should begin to think of God’s relation to the world by thinking of God’s purpose and end for creation. This leads us to also contemplate God’s ability and thus lordship over creation. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the content of the cosmos and the workings of nature are the result of God’s will and also subordinate to his Lordship. And if forces of nature are subordinate to the will of God, then making sense of particular, special, and redemptive acts of God seems less problematic.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 34.

<sup>84</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 34.

<sup>85</sup> Also, for an interesting discussion on the relation between revelation and reason in Brunner, see Eugene Paul Heideman, *The Relation of Revelation and Reason in E. Brunner and H. Bavinck* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1959).

### 3.2. Providence

This section considers Brunner's doctrine of providence. There will be minor overlap between this section and the section on providence in Chapter 4. As articulated in Chapter 4, the main conception of providence is that God preserves and governs creation according to his original plan for creation.<sup>86</sup> Brunner claims that the doctrine of providence has to do with the following: "that action, and that present activity of God in the world, which is only indirectly, not directly, related to the redemption of the world."<sup>87</sup> In chapter four, we examined the activity of God and the activity of human agents. Now, our attention is on the rest of the created world.

Brunner begins by making, again, the distinction between preservation and creation. This distinction is important for Brunner because he wants to maintain some level of independence for the created order. Thus, he claims,

If all that is, and all that happens, is simply the activity of God, that is, if the doctrine of the Omnipotence of God becomes the doctrine of His *sole* power, and the doctrine of His total activity becomes that of His *sole* activity, then, in fact, the difference between creation and preservation becomes very indistinct.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 148. Brunner writes, "Under the heading of the idea of Providence, classical works of dogmatic theology deal with the relation of god to the created world, which we expand in the ideas of the preservation of the world and the divine government of the world..." (p. 148).

<sup>87</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 148.

<sup>88</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 149.

So, for Brunner, if the distinction between God's activity and the general workings of nature is lost, then there is no clear distinction between God and the world. Thus, because Brunner wants to maintain a clear distinction between the created world and God, then God's activity after creation must be seen as one of preservation.

In his section on "God's Action and the Established Order of Nature," Brunner discusses the relation between God's activity and the constancy of the cosmos and admits that there is an established order in nature. He writes, "There are regular happenings, laws of nature and the like. There are more or less constant forms of nature which are so arranged that they reproduce their kind with unfailing regularity."<sup>89</sup> Brunner argues that this 'constancy' of nature is essential for human action and for our ability to discern nature.<sup>90</sup> This also provides a problem for understanding divine action. Brunner wonders, "What is the relation of this constancy of Nature—even though it is only relative in character—to the divine action?"<sup>91</sup>

For Brunner, the constancy of nature clearly reflects God's faithful and constant activity in the world. He writes,

God has given the world its 'orders', and it is precisely in these orders that He constantly reveals His Creator-Spirit, and His Power as Creator. Order and

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<sup>89</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 151.

<sup>90</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 151. He writes, "All our action in the external world consists in using things on the basis of, and in agreement with, their known constancy. Where this ceases, our activity ceases. Thus it is not only the scientist who is interested in this element of constancy, but it is a matter of vital concern for the ordinary person in his daily business" (p. 151).

<sup>91</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 151.

regularity are characteristic of His arrangements. The very order which can be mathematically conceived is the expression of a mathematical Creator Spirit.<sup>92</sup>

So, what exactly is the relation between God and the order of nature? According to Brunner, the answer is simple: God arranged the order. The order of creation is not merely a reflection of God's will, but it is also a reflection of God's character. God is not only powerful, but he is also constant, faithful, wise, and omniscient. He writes, "This constancy of the order of Nature, and of the forms of Nature, is the expression of the divine will, of the limitations imposed by God, and of the divine faithfulness."<sup>93</sup> Thus, the order of the cosmos reflects what God is like.

In addition, Brunner argues that there is a soteriological reason for wanting to maintain the orderliness of creation. He states,

This constancy of natural laws, and also of natural forms, is also the pre-supposition of the divine revelation in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is 'true Man'; He appears in human form, as 'a man of flesh and blood', a man 'born of a woman'. And His whole way of living and acting is that of a man within our familiar ordered world. For Jesus, too, stones are stones and not bread; for Him too the Cross is hard, so hard and so heavy indeed that another man had to carry it for Him. He, the Crucified, suffered in mind and body what every human being must suffer who hangs upon a cross. Only thus can He be the Christ.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 152.

<sup>93</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 152.

<sup>94</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 152.

In this inspiring quote, we see the seriousness with which Brunner treats the order of the cosmos. The laws of nature certainly point to an orderly God. The constancy of nature reflects the faithfulness of God. The laws of nature are arranged by God's will, and thus reflect God's will and nature. And the constancy of nature also reassures believers of redemption. Nothing less is at stake in the orders of nature.

Obviously, Brunner also wants to claim that God's activity is behind the order of nature. For this reason, Brunner rules out Deism. He argues,

But when we say that something of God's faithfulness is revealed in the constancy of natural things and the order of Nature, we have already eliminated the deistic error which suggests that the causality of nature exists on its own account, as if it were wholly independent of God's presence and God's action. God reveals Himself and His Presence in this constancy which He grants to things. It is thus that *God* acts—not Nature, independent of God.<sup>95</sup>

This is Brunner's strongest claim yet. God acts in nature, and nature does not function apart from God's activity. Brunner does not appear to suggest that the events and actions of nature are identical with God's activity. He appears to be suggesting that nature does not act independently of God, as if God were far off watching the events of nature take place. More precisely, behind the events of nature is the activity of God. Brunner writes, "Nowhere does the Bible question the reality of the world as an independent reality

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<sup>95</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 152.

which has been established by God.”<sup>96</sup> For Brunner, the world is real and independent but not completely independent; it is also preserved by God.

However, Brunner avoids precisely stating how God acts through forces of nature. As articulated in chapter 4, Brunner does not find the concept of divine concurrence helpful. In fact, he thinks that it is problematic. Here he suggests, “There is causality between created objects, but there is none between the Creator and the Creation.”<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, he writes, “this doctrine is dangerous because it severs that which ought not to be divided: the independence of the Creation and the Divine work of Preservation.”<sup>98</sup> Brunner wants to maintain both the independence of the created order and God’s work in upholding and governing the same order. Thus, he rejects the task of attempting to discern how it is that both can be upheld, which the concept of divine concurrence tries to do. For this reason, Brunner concludes, “Therefore it is better not even to suggest a causal explanation, and to renounce the causal idea altogether in relation to the Divine activity.”<sup>99</sup> Again, for Brunner, we find ourselves in a peculiar intellectual position. We simply do not know how it is that God preserves and governs creation and, at the same time, how it is that creation remains independent.

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<sup>96</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 153.

<sup>97</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 153.

<sup>98</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 154.

<sup>99</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 154.



For Brunner, despite the impossibility of articulating *how* God works in the order of Creation, he wants to maintain a strong sense of providence. He writes, “All that happens is connected with the divine Purpose; all is ordered in accordance with, and in subordination to, the divine plan and the final divine purpose.”<sup>100</sup> Clearly, Brunner does not see a problem in defending a strong concept of God’s activity in the world, even though he cannot articulate the precise connection or joint between God’s activity and the activity of nature.<sup>101</sup>

Having established the relation between God and the world, Brunner then turns to the important issue of miracles and argues that God has the freedom to act differently than he normally does. He asserts,

To deny the reality of miracle would be to deny the freedom of God, of the God who is the Lord of the whole world. To see this God at work, who is the free Lord of the world which He has created, means encountering miracle, whether this miracle of the divine action works through the laws of nature or outside them.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 155.

<sup>101</sup> Owen Thomas argues that the causal nexus is at the heart of the issue. Essentially, he argues that the traditional notion of double agency has not done enough to explain the causal nexus. Owen Thomas, “Recent Thought on Divine Agency,” in *Divine Action: Studies Inspired by the Philosophical Theology of Austin Farrer*, eds. Brian Hebblethwaite and Edward Henderson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 35-50. Austin Farrer has been a leading proponent of double agency theory. He argues that there is no need to locate the precise causal nexus of this theory, and in fact, it may very well be impossible to locate the precise causal joint between God and creaturely action. Cf. Austin Farrer, *Faith and Speculation* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 65-66 and 68-85.

<sup>102</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 160.

Thus, without denying the conceptual difficulty of making sense of special divine action, Brunner wants to keep a proper perspective. That is, *how* God works through the laws of nature is not as vital as understanding that God has the freedom to do so. God, Brunner writes, works “through the constancy of nature and its laws.”<sup>103</sup>

Brunner describes the contingent nature of natural laws and states that God acts when miracles are absent and that God’s activity is free from the events of nature. He writes, “As against the Deistic view we would say that God is actively at work even where no ‘miracles’ occur; as against the Pantheistic view we would say, that God’s working is not confined to the sphere of natural causality.”<sup>104</sup> That is, God acts in ordinary and in extraordinary ways. The natural order of the cosmos does not preclude God from acting apart from it, nor does the natural order of the cosmos preclude God from acting with it. All of that is to say that natural laws and the order of the cosmos does not restrict God’s activity. These laws bear no logical necessity. These laws maintain no physical necessity. God alone, Brunner argues, is absolute. He writes, “This is precisely what is meant by the idea of the sovereignty or the freedom of God.”<sup>105</sup>

Brunner also couples the discussion of God’s activity and the natural order to the concept of redemption and claims that understanding the relation between God’s activity and the natural order should not be restricted to providence. He argues,

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<sup>103</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 160.

<sup>104</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 160.

<sup>105</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 161.

It is precisely the God who does not change His purpose who must meet His creature *extra ordinem*, because the creature (i.e. man) has changed its order and purpose: this is because He wills to restore its original relation to His creatures. Thus the God of the Bible, both of the Old and of the New Testament, is the living God, who intervenes in the course of history.”<sup>106</sup>

Here, the claim by Brunner has bold implications. Based on his claim, one gets the impression that Brunner expects God to act in extraordinary ways. That is, because of the fall, and because God intends to have communion with humanity, God must act outside the order of creation in order to bring about his purpose for creation. It is fitting for God to intervene in the course of human history. And since the laws of nature are expressions of God’s will, then it makes sense that God is able to perform special acts.

Brunner also discusses the law and the freedom of God as it relates to the cross. Just as God’s will arranges the physical laws of nature, so God’s will arranges “all material moral precepts.”<sup>107</sup> He writes,

This order is—not eternal, it is true, any more than creation is eternal—but constant and abiding, so long as the created world endures. It is explicitly emphasized in the Law of God, in order that it should not be overlooked. It is inviolable. It is provided with the sanctions of divine wrath and divine punishment in order that man may realize that it must be taken seriously.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 161.

<sup>107</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 162.

<sup>108</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 162.

The physical laws of nature parallel the moral laws. Both are constant, both are arranged by God's will, both must be taken seriously, and God is free from both. God is able to stand above the moral precepts and forgive human sin. However, because of the seriousness of God's law and the seriousness of sin, Christ is punished.<sup>109</sup> He writes, "Thus both the legal order, and the supra-legal freedom of sovereign love are deeply rooted in the nature of God. Thus even the God who transcends the natural order, in the fact that He works miracles, is not a God of disorder."<sup>110</sup>

### 3.3. Brunner's Response to Bultmann: Miracles and the Order of Nature<sup>111</sup>

Brunner briefly tackles the demythologizing project of Bultmann and suggests that the result of demythologizing is that many claims made by the NT need to be rejected. He states,

Bultmann...condemns [these claims] as 'mythology', since they are in accordance with a view of the world which we no longer hold and can therefore no longer combine with our present view of the world; thus we cannot retain them in our faith and doctrine without an inner conflict. The two irreconcilable pictures of the world may be described by the formulae 'mythical' and 'scientific'. 'Our thinking is irrevocably moulded by science' (*Offenbarung und Heilsgeschehen*, 1941, pp. 27 ff.). By a world 'moulded by science' Bultmann means a causal

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<sup>109</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 163.

<sup>110</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 163.

<sup>111</sup> This section appears as an appendix to chapter 6 of Brunner's *Dogmatics*. The title of this section in Brunner is as follows: "The Question of Miracles and the Postulate of 'De-Mythologizing.'" In chapter 3, I mentioned that Bultmann argues that we cannot objectify claims made in scripture, especially claims of miracles and other such things that would give the modern mind problems. Brunner is apparently aware of this claim by Bultmann, and in this appendix he attempts to address it.

view, that is, an understanding of objective events which is determined clearly and on all sides by causality.<sup>112</sup>

Here, Clayton's view appears to mimic Bultmann's claim. That is, the modern mind has been ingrained by science and technology to such an extent that the miraculous claims made by the NT must be inaccurate (in light of the modern mind) or else they need to be re-evaluated (in light of science) in order to make sense of those claims.

However, Brunner thinks that what is going on is not whether the biblical claims are credible or incredible, but rather the entire message of the Bible. He writes, "Here what is at stake is nothing less than the central theological question of revelation, of 'Saving History', and the knowledge of God as a 'Living God', who is the Lord of Nature and of History."<sup>113</sup> What is Brunner attempting to suggest? Brunner does not want to defend individual miracle claims made in scripture or those made outside of scripture. The issue is much bigger than this. For Brunner, at stake is the Christian faith itself; at stake is the Bible itself.

Brunner is ready to admit that the worldview of the Bible and modern humanity are quite different and that this difference leads to some problems. He states, "...we must admit that the witnesses of revelation who speak to us in the Old and in the New Testament have a view of the world which is foreign to us, and that an important task of theology is to distinguish, and even to separate this from their actual witness to revelation

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<sup>112</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 186. Brackets mine.

<sup>113</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 186.

itself.”<sup>114</sup> Therefore, at least in one sense, Brunner agrees with Clayton’s assertion that claims of modern science need to be taken seriously.

Brunner then mentions the “uniform interrelatedness of Nature” axiom as one potentially problematic claim for making sense of God’s activity in the world.<sup>115</sup> The ‘uniform interrelatedness of nature’ has to do with the ability to explain all events in mechanistic terms. If this axiom is true, then the concept of divine action seems untenable.

For Brunner, there are two problems with this axiom. First, Brunner suggests that theologians, philosophers, and even scientists have questioned this axiom. In fact, he argues, “The severely determinist mechanistic formula has been proved untenable, not only in the sphere of Historical Science, but also in that of Biology, and finally even in Physics. To-day, not even the physicist believes in the ‘closed universe’ of a thinker like Laplace.”<sup>116</sup> Because of its rejection, Brunner writes, “The idea of the ‘uniform interrelatedness of nature’ has ceased to be taken seriously in theological discussion of Miracle.”<sup>117</sup> Secondly, even if this axiom is true, it is hard to see how it is problematic for conceiving of special divine action if one emphasizes that God is Lord of the natural order. He asserts,

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<sup>114</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 187.

<sup>115</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 188-189.

<sup>116</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 189.

<sup>117</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 189.

The theology which has not been infected by the Pantheism of Spinoza, the rationalism of Kant, or the Monism of Idealism, but which believed in the God of the Bible, emphasized the truth that the God of the Christian Faith is certainly not the God postulated in the theology of Schleiermacher, whose action is identical with the processes of nature, but that He is the Living God, who, as the Creator of the natural order, is also its Lord.<sup>118</sup>

For this reason, Brunner argues that Bultmann's project is untenable. Demythologizing specific biblical claims does not take the freedom of God seriously. Brunner even hints that the biblical claims themselves could be used as evidence that the 'uniformity of nature' axiom is false. Still, he claims that we do not need to do this because the axiom itself is untenable.<sup>119</sup> Modern science, he argues, has demonstrated that the universe is more open than previously imagined.

Brunner also discusses demythologizing in volume three of his *Dogmatics* and admits that, recently, some theologians attempt to take both biblical and scientific claims seriously.<sup>120</sup> As a result of this approach, two worldviews appear: (1) the worldview of the biblical narrative, and (2) the worldview of modern science.

Brunner isolates three key differences between the biblical worldview and the scientific worldview: (a) space, (b) time, and (c) causality. Causality, argues Brunner, is the key difference between pre-modern and modern understandings of the natural world

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<sup>118</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 188.

<sup>119</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption*, 190.

<sup>120</sup> Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation*, vol. 3, trans. David Cairns (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 401-407.

and divine action.<sup>121</sup> However, the problem of causality and understanding divine action is nothing new. He asserts,

Since the beginning of Christian history the Biblical concept of God and all talk of a personal God, of an action of God in time, has been regarded as mythical, as something that cannot be expected of mature philosophical thinking. If there is indeed truth contained in Christian faith, yet it is truth in a completely inadequate form, which if it is to stand the test of critical reflection must be translated from its symbolic and mythical form into an unmythical one.<sup>122</sup>

For Brunner, modifying the notion of an act of God is the real issue of demythologizing. But, again, particular miracles are not the only problem. Brunner suggests that if this approach is used, then the Christian faith as a whole is at stake.

However, Brunner maintains that as long the living character of God is emphasized, problems associated with the relation between divine action and forces of nature are not so problematic. For Brunner, this means emphasizing “His action, His self-revelation in history.”<sup>123</sup> He states,

What the philosopher calls inadequate and ‘primitive’ is marked by two characteristics: by the symbolism of God’s Personal Being (anthropomorphism) and by His intervention in history (miracle). The symbolism of Personal Being is to be found in expressions such as God, the Father, the King, the Lord, the Judge, etc.; that is, in gross anthropomorphisms. The symbolism of divine action is obvious in the conceptions: God comes, God speaks, He creates, He hears, He saves, He forgives sins.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation*, 402-403.

<sup>122</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation*, 403.

<sup>123</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation*, 405.

<sup>124</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation*, 405.



Thus, for Brunner, focusing on what God is like and what God actually does helps provides a theological framework that makes sense of the concept of divine action. God is to be understood as transcendent, infinite, incomprehensible, independent, and incomparable, “and His action within time founded in His thought and will ‘before all time.’”<sup>125</sup> That is, God has a plan for the world and the resolve and ability to carry it through.

Let us sum up Brunner’s response to Bultmann. Brunner takes Bultmann’s project seriously because the Christian faith itself is at stake. However, he argues that the demythologizing project is fundamentally flawed. First, the demythologizing project prematurely abandons the concept that God is Lord of the natural order and thus free to intervene in its processes. Second, the demythologizing project is grounded in a flawed mechanistic cosmology. Thus, there is really nothing incoherent about the concept of special divine action in the context of the natural order. In addition, Brunner admits that our language concerning the personal character of God and God’s activity is flawed. Nevertheless, the status of our language does not warrant abandoning the traditional conception of a God who acts and intervenes in the course of human history

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<sup>125</sup> Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith, and the Consummation*, 405.

#### 4. Towards a Theology of Divine Action

This chapter began by considering scholarship that claims that the concept of divine action faces problems from modern science. However, specifying how the modern scientific worldview inhibits talk of divine action proves difficult. And when the scholarship of Clayton, Dilley, and Polkinghorne was considered, the precise problem was elusive and abstract. The problem seems to boil down to the modern scientific mindset. It is argued that the modern mind finds the notion of God's activity suspicious and that theology needs to construct models of divine action that address this concern. However, just what the modern scientific mind finds problematic about the concept of divine action is equally elusive.

Still, some claim that science gives the concept of divine action problems. If one shares Brunner's convictions about God's relation to the created order, then it is hard to see just how the concept of divine action is so problematic. How could it be that divine action is problematic if God has arranged the order of nature? How could it be that the concept of divine action is problematic if God is Lord over creation and thus free from its operations? In fact, this is precisely the point. One wonders if the concept of divine action has been prematurely abandoned based on either a miscalculated assumption of incoherence or else some other ontological or metaphysical prejudice.

The fundamental claim of Bultmann, Dilley, Clayton, and Kaufman seems to be that the modern scientific mind finds the traditional concept of divine action unacceptable, irrational, or suspicious. They argue that we need to take scientific claims seriously, and the result of taking modern science seriously is a worldview incompatible with the biblical world view. As a result, there is a need to either abandon the Christian faith or else reinterpret the concept of divine action to make it more appealing for the sophisticated modern mind. The choice made by some is to reinterpret God's activity in the world. The new versions of the concept of divine action have two goals in mind. First, they intend to make the concept of divine action coherent in the context of the modern scientific claims. Second, the new versions of the concept of divine action fulfill the apologetic task of theology. That is, the reinterpretation states how it could be that God acts in the world for the sophisticated modern mindset. Thus, belief in miracles is no longer an obstacle to faith.

Brunner claims that we do not have to reinterpret the concept of divine action to give it coherence and to make it acceptable for the modern mind. He does this by addressing the demythologizing project of Bultmann. The contention here is that Brunner's answers are helpful and insightful. In fact, I think that Brunner's thought on the relation between divine action and the natural order forms part of a coherent foundation for how to think properly about God's activity in the world.

The fundamental claim by Brunner is that God relates to the world as its Lord and that God brought the world about. This fundamental claim is coupled with the assertion

that God has a purpose for the world. Furthermore, God's plan for the cosmos was conceived before the cosmos was brought about. And when the concept of God's lordship is incorporated with the concept that God has a plan for the cosmos, then it should not come as a surprise that God has the ability and resolve to bring his plan about.

Brunner also states that the content of the cosmos and the processes of nature are the result of God's will and are also subordinate to his Lordship. This idea entails that the natural order is contingent because it is the consequence of God's activity and it continues to be dependent upon God for its existence and operation. Because of this, the nature of the natural order of the cosmos does not preclude God from acting apart from it, nor does the nature of the natural order of the cosmos preclude God from acting through it. All that is to say that God is not restricted by the order of the cosmos because God is its author.

Brunner also argues that because of the fall, and because God intends to have communion with humanity, God must act outside of the order of nature in order to bring about his purpose for creation. That is, Brunner argues that it is fitting for God to act in extraordinary ways in the course of human history. And since the processes of nature are expressions of God's activity, it makes sense that God is able and willing to perform special acts if necessary in order to bring God's plan about.

Brunner seems to think that divine action and special divine action make sense and are unproblematic, especially if the proper perspective is maintained when thinking through these issues. For Brunner, the proper perspective has to do with the concept of

God as Lord of the cosmos and everything that is entailed by this claim. If this is maintained, then it is hard to see how the concept of divine action, miracles, redemption, providence, and the like are so problematic.

But perhaps science provides good reasons for abandoning that perspective, that is, for abandoning those basic beliefs that most Christians, arguably, would hold. Brunner cites the “uniform relatedness of nature” as a possible reason used for abandoning the traditional notion of divine action. However, according to Brunner, many scientists have challenged this principle even in his day. But if the cosmos is in fact mechanistic and predictable, *then* would Christians have good reasons for abandoning the traditional model of divine action? Perhaps, but Brunner seems to think that the Bible itself gives evidence that the cosmos is not predictable and mechanistic.

Perhaps there are other challenges to the theological perspective as provided by Brunner. Other challenges could either be *de jure* or *de facto* in nature. However, these sorts of challenges are of a different breed than those raised by Bultmann and Clayton. Clayton is never really clear what sort of objection he has in mind and neither is Bultmann. As already mentioned, Clayton indicates that he is not concerned with epistemological issues, so perhaps he has *de facto* objections in mind. This would make sense in light of his suggestion that we should take the claims of science seriously. And so he argues that the claims of contemporary science create a culture of disbelief with regard to divine action. But again, if one holds that Brunner’s theological perspective is true (as, no doubt, a good many Christians do), then how exactly does contemporary

science challenge the concept of God's activity in the world? It is being suggested here that there are no sufficient grounds for abandoning this theological perspective.

Surely, there are still some issues that need to be addressed, such as how to understand the causal connection between God and the natural order. In all likelihood, though, one may find, like Austin Farrer, that pursuing answers to that question and others may lead to epistemic difficulties. But problems of knowing how exactly God's activity connects to the processes of nature does not count against having a proper perspective of God's relation to the natural processes and for maintaining the concept of a God who sustains the cosmos, governs it according to his ordained plan, and intervenes in its history.

## **5. Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that who God is and what God does needs to be taken more seriously when thinking through the concept of divine action in relation to the natural order.

This chapter examined the challenge posed by some scholars such as Clayton, Polkinghorne, Dilley, and Bultmann. It was argued that the fundamental claim by these scholars is that the modern mind has been so ingrained by science and technology that the traditional understanding of divine action is problematic. The modern world view and the biblical world view are so different that the modern mind simply cannot accept

traditional notions of God's special activity. Thus, God's special activity needs to be understood in alternative ways. However, if this is the main objection to conceiving of divine action, then perhaps these arguments are guilty of question begging. If this is not the objection, then it is not clear what the challenge is to divine action.

Brunner's theological grounds for making sense of God's activity were outlined and examined. His perspective is that divine action is not only coherent but also that it is fitting. God is free and able to act in the world, and natural processes are not problematic because they are, by nature, contingent and dependent upon God. Furthermore, Brunner anticipates God's activity because of the fall and suggests that it is fitting for God to intervene in the course of human history in order to bring about communion with humanity. And armed with this perspective, perhaps the challenge of contemporary science can be met.

## CHAPTER SIX

### CONCLUSION: TOWARD A MODEL OF DIVINE ACTION

#### 1. Introduction

How could it be that God acts in the world? How can we make sense of divine action? These are key questions. This dissertation has demonstrated that answering those questions requires the consideration of what God is like and what God does because these issues give rise to the notion of divine action and, thus, need to be considered when thinking about God's activity in the world. And although these issues do not fully answer the questions posed above, and even though problems persist, they do begin to make sense of divine action by explaining the manner, effect, purpose, extent, and degree of divine action. In fact, the relation between what God is like and what God does and the concept of divine action seems so strong at times that sense cannot be made of God's activity without these issues even though much of the contemporary discussion fails to take them seriously.

Although Brunner does not discuss the concept of divine action as an independent topic, he raises the notion of divine action throughout his theology. Divine action appears in his discussion on God's nature, divine providence, God's creative and redemptive activity, the work of Christ, and anthropology. Part of Brunner's insight rests on his thought which indicates an inexorable relation between the concept of divine



action and who God actually is and what God actually does. That is, that divine action is not an independent topic demonstrates the fundamental connection between theological issues and the concept of divine action in Brunner's thought. Thus, it was demonstrated in previous chapters that Brunner's thought helps make sense of the nature of the divine agent, of the relation between divine and human action, and of the relation between divine action and the natural order. The following reviews conclusions made in previous chapters and proposes a working model of divine action.

## 2. A Working Model of Divine Action

Chapter 2 agreed with Thomas that a model of divine action ought to address six aspects of "how" to the question, "How could it be that God acts in the world?". They are as follows:

1. By what means? E.g., God acts in the world through secondary causes.
2. In what way or manner? E.g., God acts in the world uniformly, purposively, persuasively.
3. To what effect? E.g., God acts in the world to heal diseases and to inspire good actions.
4. With what meaning or for what reason or purpose? E.g., God acts in the world to achieve the divine purposes of justice and peace.
5. To what extent or degree? E.g., God acts in the world everywhere and always.
6. On analogy with what? E.g., God acts in the world as the mind acts on the brain.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Owen C. Thomas, "Summary Analysis," *God's Activity in the World: The Contemporary Problem* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1983), 234-235.

Thomas complained that views of divine action address only a few aspects of “how,” and, thus, it’s difficult to compare views. Usually, Thomas asserts, the aspects of means, manner, and extent of divine action are addressed. Brunner’s thought addresses four aspects, namely, the manner, effect, purpose and extent of divine action.<sup>2</sup> These aspects are now considered as a proposal for a model of divine action.

### 2.1. The Manner of Divine Action

In what way or manner does God act in the world? Although Brunner does not directly address this issue, his thought points to the concept of love as a key characteristic of God. In fact, he argues that love is not just an attribute or characteristic of God, but love rightly defines God. Thus, God acts lovingly. That is, if Brunner were asked this question he would probably suggest that “lovingly” is an important aspect for making sense of the manner or way in which God acts. Of course, things are more complicated than this. But the idea that God acts in loving ways is a good place to start.

Brunner might also suggest that the way or manner in which God acts depends upon the circumstance. For example, God acts decisively, powerfully, and also freely in creating the cosmos. And the notion of love appears here, for God certainly created the cosmos out of love as well. Furthermore, one might suggest that God acts authoritatively in performing miracles and purposively when redeeming humanity. And in the work of Christ, Jesus acted selflessly in the crucifixion and victoriously in the resurrection. And the Holy Spirit acts mightily and persuasively in the human heart. Finally, God acts

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<sup>2</sup> Brunner does not address the means of divine action. Cf. section 2.5. of this chapter for a full discussion of this omission in Brunner.

ordinarily and extraordinarily in creation. Thus, although investigation of what God is like does not address every concern, it does provide indispensable data for making sense of the manner and ways of God's activity.

## 2.2. The Effect of Divine Action

To what effect does God act in the world? Or, what is brought about by God's activity? For Brunner, a good many things are brought about by divine action. God's work in creation and redemption features prominently in his thought, and God's work makes up the content of divine action. For example, as a result of God's activity some are forgiven and others are condemned, the cosmos is brought about and then renewed. Furthermore, as a result of God's activity, God reveals himself to creation, the incarnation is brought about, humanity is reconciled to God, sin is defeated, prayer is answered, and the human heart is transformed. In fact, part of the effect of God's activity is that God's nature and plan for the cosmos is revealed. These are just some of the things that are brought about by divine action. Any model of God's activity, thus, needs to consider these (and other) things.

God's future activity could also be considered. Although Brunner does not address the concept of divine action in his discussion on the consummation, God's activity is certainly relevant. Thus, consideration of God's future activity may also provide indispensable data for making sense of divine action. For example, the future activity of God could address the experience of evil in human history, which Brunner admits creates conceptual problems for the concept of divine action. And so part of the

effect of God's activity is that all that is currently wrong will be made right. Thus, present injustices will be fixed when God finishes his work. Obviously, God's future activity does not remove every conceptual problem, but this approach does provide other avenues of consideration and investigation.

### 2.3. The Purpose of Divine Action

For what reason or purpose does God act? Brunner often discusses the motivation or purpose for God's actions. When discussing God's nature, Brunner argues that the holiness of God, in part, explains divine action. Holiness explains why God is so interested in his creation and why God is actively engaged in protecting his holiness and desires humanity to act in accordance with it. Thus, when people are disobedient, God judges, and through the Father's love, the Son is sent to redeem. Brunner also argues that divine omniscience explains part of God's activity. The idea that God wants and has an intimate knowledge of humanity can help explain certain activities of God, say, sending his only Son to die for the sins of many. Why does God act? God acts because God cares for and loves his creation.

God's love for creation also explains how God relates to human creatures. God created humans so that they would be able to respond freely to God's love. However, humanity failed to live up to their responsibility and lost the ability to love God freely. Thus, in order to restore the original potential for communion, God acted through the work of Christ. The result is that God restores the original intention of his creation by re-orienting the human heart so that humanity can freely respond to God's free love and also

willingly obey and serve God. For Brunner, Scripture's main contention is that God is actively restoring his original intention to have communion with his creatures and to re-orient their hearts so that they can freely respond to God's love. God acts, in part, to carry out the purpose of having communion with humanity.

The idea that God acts in order fulfill the purpose of having communion with humanity may have another effect. At one point, Brunner contends that it is fitting for God to act in extraordinary ways in the course of human history. And since the processes of nature are expressions of God's will, it makes sense that God is able and willing to perform special acts if necessary in order to bring God's plan about. Perhaps God's purposes require extraordinary actions. Perhaps if the order of creation was left to itself, it would never achieve God's plan for it. Thus, God intervenes in the natural order in order to bring his end about. Obviously, this does not demonstrate *that* God acts in special ways, but it certainly makes sense of the claim that he does.

#### 2.4. The Extent or Degree of Divine Action

Brunner's thought helps make sense of how best to understand the relation between divine action and human action. As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Brunner has a strong sense of divine providence. He maintains that God preserves all things at all times and that God governs all things at all times toward his end. So, in a sense, God acts everywhere and at all times. However, he also suggests that the extent and degree of providence should be within the confines of human freedom, human responsibility, and God's desire to have communion with his creatures. So perhaps God's activity extends

to human action, but perhaps the degree of divine action is moderate or minimal as an alternative to maximal. For this reason, Brunner rejects the causal concept of divine concurrence because the degree of divine action understood in causal language violates human voluntary action. Another possible insight is in relation to election. Possibly, the degree of God's activity is maximal in relation to the redemption of human agents.

Brunner's thought also helps make sense of how best to understand the relation between divine action and forces of nature. Again, he maintains that God preserves all things at all times and that God governs all things at all times toward his end. Thus, again, God acts everywhere and at all times. However, Brunner also states that the content of the cosmos and the processes of nature are the result of God's will and are also subordinate to his Lordship. This idea seems to imply that the degree of divine involvement is always maximal in relation to the natural order. However, even here Brunner might say that it depends. On the one hand, perhaps when God acts in ordinary ways in the natural order the degree of God's activity is minimal. God's activity extends to the ordinary working of nature, but the degree of divine action is minimal. On the other hand, perhaps when God acts in extraordinary ways in the natural order the degree of divine action is maximal. As already maintained in an earlier chapter, the character of the natural order does not preclude God from acting apart from it, nor does the character of the natural order preclude God from acting with it. God's activity is not restricted by the order of the cosmos.

## 2.5. The Means and Analogy of Divine Action

Brunner does not explicitly address the means and analogy of divine action. It is implicit in his theology. The analogy and means of divine action for Brunner exists in the encounter with the personal God – the I-Thou encounter. Obviously, tension exists in Brunner’s account of the unilateral activity of God in creation, providence, and redemption and his reluctance to talk about God causing anything. In one discussion, he argues that we are not in a favorable position to understand the means of divine action. The means of divine action is a mystery. The absence of a more explicit account of the means and analogy of divine action in Brunner’s thought disappoints because much of the contemporary discussion focuses on these issues.

Even though Brunner does not explicitly address this issue, the concept of divine action is not doomed. Scholars should work (and have worked) on conceptualizing the means of divine action and an analogy of divine action. However, the means of divine action and an analogy of divine action needs to cohere with what God is like and what God does because these issues provide part of the relevant data for conceptualizing a model of divine action.

## 3. Conclusion

This dissertation set out to demonstrate that what God is like and what God does can help explain the manner, effect, purpose, extent, and degree of divine action.

Specifically, it was argued that Brunner's thought makes a contribution because divine action is an indispensable part of his theology and that his thought provides valuable insights into the notion that God acts in the cosmos. This project was undertaken because recent scholarship on divine action does not take what God is like and what God does seriously enough. The upshot of this project is that scholarship needs to keep these issues in mind when discussing the concept of divine action because what God is like and what God does give rise to the concept of divine action and provide essential data for making sense of that concept.



## APPENDIX

### DISSERTATION THESES

#### THESES RELATED TO THE DISSERTATION

1. Emil Brunner's theological writings contain insights into the nature of God's activity in the world. In clarifying the nature of God's activity, this previously overlooked source rightly considers what God is like and what God actually does.
2. Contemporary discussions inadequately consider what God does and what God is like as possible resources for making sense of problems associated with the concept of God's activity. A theory of divine action at best takes into account the means, manner, effect, purpose, extent, and degree of God's activity and doesn't merely address the problems.
3. Considering a wide range of divine attributes—such as God's name, love, lordship and holiness—helps make sense of God's activity by illuminating the manner, effect, purpose, and intention of God's activity.
4. Contra Maurice Wiles, Ian Barbour, and others, the notion of God's otherness does not create an insurmountable obstacle for conceiving of God's activity in the world. In fact, when one adds to divine transcendence the divine attributes of holiness, personhood, and love, the notion of divine action can overcome conceptual problems created by God's otherness.
5. Discussions on the relation between divine and human action usually focus on the doctrine of divine concurrence. However, examining claims about God's work in creation and redemption and God's original intention to have communion with humanity helps clarify our understanding of the extent and degree of God's activity in relation to human activity.
6. Contra Philip Clayton, the claims of modern science do not necessarily cause insurmountable problems for traditional notions of God's activity in the world. Understanding the aim and scope of science, in addition to considering God's creative work and lordship, helps make sense of the relation between divine action and natural processes. This relation does not necessarily preclude particular acts of God including special or extraordinary activities such as miracles and redemptive acts. Nor do natural processes necessarily preclude God from acting through the ordinary workings of nature.

#### THESES RELATED TO GRADUATE WORK

7. The prophetic, priestly, and kingly offices of Jesus Christ provide a theologically rich model for conceiving of his atoning life and work.

8. Christians want to maintain that Jesus Christ is morally good. However, Jesus' moral goodness creates conceptual problems for the divine attribute of necessary goodness. If Jesus has the divine attribute of necessary goodness, then it is logically impossible for Jesus to perform morally impermissible actions. However, moral goodness requires significant freedom, including the possibility of performing morally impermissible actions. Therefore, Christians have to maintain either that Jesus is not morally good or that he is not necessarily good.

9. Paul Helm's argument for compatibilistic human freedom lacks force. He argues that if non-theistic determinism is compatible with human freedom, then theistic determinism is also compatible with human freedom. However, there are philosophical and theological grounds for rejecting compatibilism. And just because compatibilistic human freedom fits well with his understanding of a theistically determined universe does not provide sufficient grounds for accepting such a theory.

10. Speaking about God must be a dynamic enterprise, one which attempts to account for the dynamics of our own language and the dynamic of language used in Scripture.

11. The life and ministry of Jesus Christ does not abrogate God's law, but rather his life and ministry helps us properly understand what God requires of us.

#### THESES RELATED TO PERSONAL INTERESTS

12. Our call to transform and engage culture has to be considered along with the call to be a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people belonging to God. As aliens and strangers in this world, Christians should place their hope in the heavenly city.

13. Just as our Heavenly Father has shown us compassion and forgiveness, so we are called to show compassion and forgiveness to others.

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