

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

# Known by God: C. S. Lewis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer

*Brian S. Rosner*

*Dr Rosner is Senior Lecturer in New Testament and Ethics at Moore Theological College and Honorary Senior Research Fellow in Ancient History at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia.*

KEY WORDS: known by God, humility, comfort, the image of God

Knowing God is central to every version of Christian theology. What is insufficiently accounted for, however, is the fact that there are two sides to the divine-human relationship. A huge imbalance exists between the sheer volume of scholarly and popular output concerning knowing God over against the overwhelming neglect of, dare I say it, the more important theme of being known by God.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, all of Scripture teaches God's general omniscience. God knows our way, days, thoughts, the secrets of the heart and so on; as 1 John 3:20 puts it, 'he knows everything' (RSV). On the other hand, the Bible speaks explicitly of his relational knowledge less than twenty times.<sup>2</sup> However, these few instances appear at critical points: in the Old Testament, Abraham (Gen 18:19), Moses (Ex 33:12), David (2 Sam 7:20), Jeremiah (Jer 1:5) and the nation Israel (Amos 3:2; Hos 11:12; 13:5) are all known by God; in the New Testament, being known by God defines Christian existence (Gal 4:8-9; 1 Cor 8:3), is the criterion of the last judgement (Matt 7:23; 25:12 ['I never knew you']; cf. Luke 13:27) and is a measure of eschatological glory (1 Cor 13:12).

This introductory essay approaches the subject via the brief but poignant remarks of two twentieth-century authors. If C. S. Lewis recognizes the primacy of being known by God, Dietrich Bonhoeffer helps define it and underscores its pastoral value. As we shall see, both authors accurately reflect the main contours of the Bible's own treatment.

## 'Well – he knows me': C. S. Lewis (*The Voyage of the Dawntrader*)

It may seem odd that C. S. Lewis' comments about being known by God appear

1 Two exceptions are essay length treatments: a sermon of the Puritan Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of Rev. Richard Baxter: Volume 15* (London: James Duncan, 1830), 285-95; and William J. Mander, 'Does God know what it is like to be me?' *The Heythrop Journal* 43.4 (2002), 430-43.

2 That God does not 'know' everyone in this relational sense can be seen in Psalm 138:6, which uses the verb 'to see' as a synonym for 'to know': 'Though the Lord is on high, he looks upon the lowly, but the proud he knows (*yada*) from afar (NIV).'

in one of his children's books rather than in his theological works. As it turns out, the intimate nature of the notion makes it well suited to exposition in more affective genres such as fiction and poetry.

Clearly, having a relationship with Aslan is a central theme of the fifth volume of *The Chronicles of Narnia, The Voyage of the Dawntrader*. At the end of the story Aslan invites the children to carry on their relationship with him beyond its conclusion. About to return to their own land, Edmund and Lucy despair at the prospect of losing contact with Aslan: "Are you there too, Sir?" said Edmund. "I am," said Aslan. "But there I have another name. This was the very reason why you were brought to Narnia, that by *knowing me* here for a little, you may *know me* better there."<sup>3</sup>

*The Voyage of the Dawntrader* tells the story of the adventures of Edmund and Lucy and their cousin Eustace aboard the Narnian ship with Caspian, the boy king of Narnia, and company, in search of seven missing lords and Aslan's own country. Eustace begins as an annoying foil to the main brother and sister characters; they are inquisitive, hard working and brave, he is mean, lazy and self-obsessed. "There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it... Eustace Clarence liked animals, especially beetles, if they were dead and pinned on a card."<sup>4</sup>

In chapters six and seven, ('The Adventures of Eustace' and 'How the Adventure Ended') Eustace becomes the focus of attention. Wandering off to avoid his chores, Eustace enters a dragon's cave to plunder its treasures only to find himself turned into a dragon. He is eventually saved by a huge lion who offers to 'undress' him. The resultant 'undragoning' proves to be the radical transformation of the odious Eustace into something new and attractive. He apologises for his previous behaviour, which by his own admission had been 'pretty beastly' and he does not feel 'any desire to go back to that valley for more treasure'; 'he began to be a different boy.'<sup>5</sup>

In discussing this salvific encounter, Eustace asks Edmund what he knows of Aslan, but Edmund's answer to the question is inverted in a surprising way:

"But who is Aslan? Do you know him?" [asked Eustace.] "*Well – he knows me,*" said Edmund. "He is the great Lion, the son of the Emperor-beyond-the-Sea, who saved me and saved Narnia."<sup>6</sup>

Edmund humbly confesses that Aslan knows him better than he knows Aslan.

3 C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawntrader* (Tring: Lion, 1980; orig. 1955), 188.

4 C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawntrader*, 8.

5 C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawntrader*, 87-89.

6 C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawntrader*, 87. A conversation between Aslan and the Cabby in *The Magician's Nephew* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1977; orig. 1955), 126-127, carries the same tension between knowing Aslan and being known by him: "Son," said Aslan to the Cabby. "I have known you long. Do you know me?" "Well, no, sir," said the Cabby. "Leastways, not in an ordinary manner of speaking. Yet I feel somehow, if I may make so free, as 'ow we've met before." "It is well," said the Lion. "You know me better than you think you know, and you shall live to know me better yet."

Several things are noteworthy about this response.

First, this sentiment is not unexpected in the narrative. Edmund and Lucy are drawn powerfully to Aslan, as the book's closing dialogue attests (see above). But their knowledge of him is tentative and provisional at best. Aslan is elusive and unpredictable. When he turns up, good inevitably ensues, but not without some lingering qualms. Lucy's description of one sighting is typical: "He was the size of an elephant," though at another time she only said, "The size of a carthorse." But it was not the size that mattered. Nobody dared to ask what it was. They knew it was Aslan.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, although Edmund's statement puts the accent firmly on being known by Aslan, it does so without denying genuine knowledge of Aslan by the children. Though apparently modesty forbade Edmund to assert outright knowledge of Aslan, he nonetheless goes on to describe him in terms which indicate real knowledge (he is 'the great Lion' and 'the Emperor-beyond-the-sea') and real relationship ('he saved me'). Following the poignant words, 'Well – he knows me', the second part of Edmund's response to Eustace's question ('But who is Aslan? Do you know him?') in fact answers it affirmatively; he does know Aslan.

How might the children's relationship with Aslan be conceived? The connection the children feel with Aslan may be compared to a kind of love Lewis describes in one of his theological writings. In *The Four Loves* Lewis depicts divine love as 'Gift-love' and our love for God as 'Need-love',<sup>8</sup> a love that takes and offers little or nothing in return: 'But man's love for God, from the very nature of the case, must always be very largely, and must often be entirely, a Need-love.'<sup>9</sup> Throughout the Chronicles of Narnia, Edmund, Lucy and the other children's love for Aslan approximates Need-love, whereas his love for them is Gift-love. Lewis explains Need-love as the kind of love a young child has for his or her parents. In this context it is worth noting John Calvin's definition of what it means to be known by God which is set in filial terms: 'To be known by God ... simply means to be counted among His sons.'<sup>10</sup>

Lewis refuses to disparage Need-love for God as mere selfishness, as it arises from an accurate assessment of our situation: 'We are born helpless. As soon as we are fully conscious we discover loneliness. We need others physically, emotionally, intellectually; we need them if we are to know anything, *even ourselves*.'<sup>11</sup> Knowledge of self, as we shall see with Bonhoeffer, is linked to loving and being known by another. The connection between loving and being known actually goes back to the apostle Paul: '[!]f one loves God, one is known by him.' (1 Cor 8:3; RSV)

7 C. S. Lewis, *The Voyage of the Dawntrader*, 100.

8 C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Fontana Books, 1960), 7-9.

9 C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 8.

10 John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 173. Although commenting on 1 Cor 8:3, Calvin's explanation may draw support from Gal 4:8-9, where its context is verses 5-7 and the adoption of believers as God's sons.

11 C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 7.

Edmund's 'well – he knows me' in fact strikes a chord with several biblical texts and themes. Three texts in particular betray the same combination of a clear affirmation of knowing God along with a note of humble admission that God knowing us has the primacy. In Galatians 4:8-9 Paul reminds the Gentile Christians of their previous plight before affirming their current blessed status: 'Formerly when you did not know God, you were slaves ... but now that you know God, or rather (*mallon de*) are known by God' (NIV). Burton explains well the force of the words 'or rather', which Luther aptly notes introduce Paul's 'rhetorical correction.'<sup>12</sup> '[F]ollowing a positive expression it introduces an additional and more important fact or aspect of the matter, not thereby retracting what precedes ... but so transferring the emphasis to the added fact or aspect as being of superior significance as in effect to displace the preceding thought.'<sup>13</sup> In other words, in Galatians 4:8-9 *mallon de* put the accent on God's knowledge of the Galatian Christians without denying their knowledge of him. Edmund's hesitant and contemplative 'well' serves the same purpose as Paul's 'or rather.'

A second text, 1 Corinthians 13:12, also contrasts our knowledge of God with his knowledge of us. Paul reminds believers of the incomplete nature of the former compared to the latter with reference to last things: 'then I shall know as fully as I am known' (JB). C.K. Barrett explains: 'Then, not now, there will be complete mutuality of knowledge.'<sup>14</sup> Friedrich Lang makes the same point even more sharply: To translate and paraphrase, only in the eschaton will we know God ganz, just as we are known by God ganz now.<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, in the Old Testament, Hosea 13:4-5 is comparable. The prophet, playing on the verb to know, *yada*, defends God's judgement against the idolatry of Ephraim, the most prominent tribe in the northern kingdom, by reminding them of their deliverance in the exodus: 'I am the Lord your God from the land of Egypt; you *know* no God but me, and besides me there is no saviour. It was I who *knew* you in the wilderness, in the land of drought' (RSV). In this case, as in Lewis and Paul, the subjective sense of 'the knowledge of God' supplements the objective sense; in Hosea the primacy of the former is less apparent, although the repetition of the first person singular pronoun suggests that God's knowledge of his people is key.

Another text of interest occurs at the beginning of Paul's discussion of food offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8:1-3. Apparently certain Corinthians felt that their

12 Luther, *Luther's Works* 26, 401. Cf. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 202: 'Paul's swift correction'.

13 Ernest de Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921), 229. Cf. Rom 8:34; 1 Cor 14:1, 5; Eph 4:28; 5:11; also 2 Macc 6:23; Wis 8:20.

14 C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Black's NT Commentaries; London: A and C Black, 1971), 307.

15 Friedrich Lang, *Die Briefe an die Korinther* (Das Neue Testament Deutsch; Göttingen and Zürich: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 188.

knowledge of God and the non-existence of idols qualified them to consume idol food. Paul warns them about the dangers of becoming proud in such circumstances: 'Knowledge puffs up ... if anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not know as he ought to know' (RSV). He recommends love, 'which builds up,' as the alternative to pride. A number of commentators have noticed that the next verse contains a surprising twist. Conzelmann explains: 'We expect: "The man who loves God knows him rightly." But the thought is deliberately given a different turn':<sup>16</sup> 'but if one loves God, *one is known by him*' (RSV). Whereas we anticipate the active voice, Paul uses the fact that God knows us as a way of deflating the pride of the Corinthian 'know-it-alls'. Paul reasons that while it is true that '[a]ll of us possess knowledge' (8:1a), the knowledge that really counts is a knowledge we do not possess. Paul's rhetorical strategy reminds us of Edmund's modest response to Eustace's question, which also takes 'a different turn'.

To carry on thinking in grammatical terms, in biblical thought generally the passive voice takes precedence over the active when describing how humans relate to God, the former regularly being eclipsed by the latter. As Richard Hays puts it, 'what counts is not so much our knowledge of God as God's knowledge of us. That is the syntax of salvation.'<sup>17</sup> This observation applies not only to the verb to know, but also to the verbs to choose, to call, to love and so on; we choose, call upon and love God because he first chose, called and loved us.<sup>18</sup> C. S. Lewis, via Edmund, stands in this tradition of confessing the simple but profound truth that God knows us better than we know him.<sup>19</sup>

### **'Who I really am, you know me, I am yours': Dietrich Bonhoeffer ('Who am I?')**

If Lewis' insight emerges in a work of fiction,<sup>20</sup> the relevant words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the subject of being known by God are just as far from the dispassionate, rational discourse of most modern theology, appearing as they do in a highly personal poem entitled, 'Who am I?' Bonhoeffer goes one step further

16 Hans Conzelmann, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Hermeneia; translated by James W. Leitch; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 141. See also Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 139.

17 Cf. Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, on 1 Cor 8:3, 138.

18 The handing over in Romans 6:17 is not 'that pattern of teaching' to the Christians, but the reverse.

19 Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 308: 'Even in the Gospel man does not fully know God, and he ought not to deceive himself into thinking that he does; but God knows him, and this is the all-important truth.' Also J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downer's Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1973), 37: 'What matters supremely, therefore, is not, in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it – the fact that He knows me.'

than Lewis: put simply, not only does God know me better than I know him, but God knows me better than I know myself.

One of his prison poems, 'Who am I?' was written as a kind of self-analysis in 1944, the year before Bonhoeffer's execution; the question of the title occurs five times in the body. The opening three stanzas report pictures of Bonhoeffer reflected in the views of others, namely the guards, using short lines which evoke the confined atmosphere of his prison cell:

Who am I? They often tell me,  
I step out from my cell,  
composed, contented and sure,  
like a lord from his manor.

Who am I? They often tell me,  
I speak with my jailers,  
frankly, familiar and firm,  
as though I was in command.

Who am I? They also tell me,  
I bear the days of hardship,  
unconcerned, amused and proud,  
like one who usually wins.

Bonhoeffer's view of himself is a less positive and more anguished picture, as he struggles under ghastly circumstances:

Am I really what others tell me?  
Or am I only what I myself know of me?  
Troubled, homesick, ill, like a bird in a cage,  
gasping for breath, as though being strangled,  
hungering for colours, for flowers, for songs of birds,  
thirsting for kind words, for human company,  
quivering with anger at despotism and petty insults,  
anxiously waiting for great events,  
helplessly worrying about friends far away,  
empty and tired of praying, of thinking, of working,  
exhausted and ready to bid farewell to it all.

A fifth stanza wrestles with this dilemma of personal integrity and identity. Bonhoeffer asks no less than six pained questions of himself:

Who am I? This or the other?  
Am I then, this today and the other tomorrow?  
Am I both at the same time? In public, a hypocrite  
and by myself, a contemptible, whining weakling?  
Or am I to myself, like a beaten army,  
flying in disorder from a victory already won?

Then the final lines of the poem voice further his frustration, but close with a simple but powerful affirmation:

Who am I? Lonely questions mock me.

Who I really am, you know me, I am yours, O God!<sup>20</sup>  
 (Wer ich auch bin, Du kennst mich, Dein bin ich, O Gott!)<sup>21</sup>

Bonhoeffer ponders the question of the self at other points in his writings. In a letter from prison written about the same time he comes to similar conclusions. His thoughts form an admirable commentary on 'Who am I?': 'One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself ... [instead] we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God.'<sup>22</sup> In another letter he wrote: 'In short, I know less than ever about myself, and I'm no longer attaching any importance to it.'<sup>23</sup>

The poem concludes that only God knows 'who I really am.' Independently, other theologians have reached similar conclusions. Meister Eckhart believed that 'God is closer to me than I am myself.'<sup>24</sup> Likewise in a recent article William J. Mander writes: 'God doesn't know what it is like to be me, for he knows me *better* than I know myself... God knows the true me; the person I really am.'<sup>25</sup> The Old Testament version of 'Who am I?', Psalm 139, concurs, with affirmations that God knows what the Psalmist will say, 'even before a word is on my tongue ... such knowledge is too wonderful for me' (vs. 4, 6).

In Bonhoeffer's case, this realization is anything but academic. It is uttered in the midst of intense longing, confusion and suffering. Like an Old Testament psalm of lament, the poem includes 'the sustained interrogative, the optative yearning, the imperative responsibilities.. [but closes with] the final vocative of faith.'<sup>26</sup> In short, 'Du kennst mich' brings light to Bonhoeffer's dark night of despair.

This benefit of being known by God is something others have briefly noticed: According to the Puritan Richard Baxter, '[t]o be known by God signifieth to be approved and loved by him, and consequently that all our concerns are perfectly

20 *The Prison Poems of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A New Translation with Commentary*, by Edward Robertson (Guildford, Surrey: Eagle, 1998), 38.

21 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft* (E. Bethge [ed]; München: Christian Kaiser, 1964; 1st edn 1951), 243. In German the final line consists of twelve monosyllables, which climaxes the poem in striking fashion.

22 Bonhoeffer, *Letter and Papers from Prison* (London: Collins, 1964), 370.

23 Cited in Robertson, *The Prison Poems of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A New Translation with Commentary*, 41.

24 Meister Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises* (London: Watkins, 1981), vol. 1, 165.

25 William J. Mander, 'Does God know what it is like to be me?', 435. Mander explains how it is possible for someone outside us to know us better than we know ourselves: "Do we best know ourselves? It is easy to see that frequently we do not, and with hindsight we are often able to realize how poorly we have judged ourselves, how well others have seen through us. The way it feels is not always the way it is, and there is no logical rule which says that a practitioner must have better knowledge of what they are doing than an outside observer."

26 David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 261-62.

known to him and regarded by him. This is *the full and final comfort of a believer*.<sup>27</sup> Similarly J.I. Packer asserts: 'There is *unspeakable comfort* [in being known by God].'<sup>28</sup> In the Bible, Nahum 1:7 makes the same point, where the prophet reassures his readers that the angry warrior-judge of verses 1-6 is also the protector of his people: 'The LORD is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; he knows (*yada*) those who take refuge in him' (RSV).<sup>29</sup>

Bonhoeffer equates being known by God with belonging to God: 'Dein bin ich.' The final two phrases of the poem are in apposition: 'you know me, *that is*, I am yours.' Biblical commentators occasionally attempt to define what it means to be known by God. A number endorse this basic definition. Walther Eichrodt, commenting on texts from Hosea, states: 'God knows his people ... that is to say, he has introduced them into a *permanent relationship of the closest mutual belonging*.'<sup>30</sup> Victor Paul Furnish writes: '[T]o be 'known' by God means to be acknowledged and affirmed as *God's own*, embraced within a community that lives from God's grace and faithfulness, and called and claimed for the service of God.'<sup>31</sup> And Adolf Schlatter surmises that to be known by God is to be 'Gottes Eigentum.'<sup>32</sup> Biblical support for equating 'known by God' with 'belonging to God' can be found in 2 Timothy 2:19 (citing LXX Num 16:5): 'The Lord knows those who are his own' (JB).

However, a concept as fundamental as being known by God may be susceptible to more than one definition. Even if 'belonging to God' is an appropriate paraphrase of being known by God, it does not explain the sense in which God 'knows' those who are his. Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together* may help in this regard. In it Bonhoeffer considers Christian community in Christological terms: 'Because Christ stands between me and an other, I must not long for unmediated community with that person ... 'Christ between me and an other' means that others should encounter me only as the persons they already are for Christ ... Spiritual love recognises the true image of the other person as seen from the perspective of Jesus Christ. It is the image Jesus Christ has formed and wants to form in all people.'<sup>33</sup>

However, for Bonhoeffer, the image of God in Christ is critical not only for how Christians relate to each other, but also for an individual Christian's perception of him- or herself; David Ford summarises Bonhoeffer's position: '[T]here is no immediate recognition of who one is, only self-recognition before Jesus

27 Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of Rev. Richard Baxter Works*, 285.

28 J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 37.

29 NIV translates the last clause as 'he cares for those who trust in him.'

30 Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament: Volume Two* (London: SCM Press, 1967), 292.

31 Victor Paul Furnish, *The Theology of the First Letter to the Corinthians* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 73 (on 1 Cor 8:3).

32 Adolf Schlatter, *Paulus, der Bote Jesu: Eine Deutung seiner Briefe an die Korinther* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1985; orig. 1934), 253.

33 Cited in Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*, 252.

Christ.<sup>34</sup> In other words, exploiting the common biblical association of knowledge and sight (e.g., Ps 138:6), Christians are to see other Christians and even themselves as God sees them (or knows them), namely in Christ.

This is too big a concept to explore at this point. Suffice it to say, if correct, it could be helpful in ascertaining the sense in which we are known by God and why it is such a positive experience. Why is being known by God necessarily a good thing? When God knows us, whom does he know? Does he see me according to the flesh, in my depravity and sin? Or does he know me as one standing in grace?

In Scripture, God's knowing someone's heart or behaviour can be either positive or negative for the person involved. In Psalm 44:21 God 'knows the secrets of the heart', which in context concern whether the nation had committed idolatry (v. 20). In Psalm 139 the thought of being 'searched and known' (v. 1) by God, that God knows all about us (vs. 1-6) and is always with us (vs. 7-12), unnerves the psalmist. It leads him to pray uncomfortably and anxiously, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there is any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (vs. 23-24). However, to be known about is different from being known, for in Scripture to be known by God in the absolute and relational sense is an unqualified blessing. Recall Paul's words in Galatians and 1 Corinthians where to be known by God signals his approval and acceptance: 'you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God' (Gal 4:9);<sup>35</sup> 'If one loves God, one is known by him' (1 Cor 8:3).

Bonhoeffer's thinking at this point is reminiscent of John Calvin's view of the image of God, which may be defined as 'God's gracious beholding of man as his child.'<sup>36</sup> In *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* T. F. Torrance expounds Calvin's view, which is set forth in Calvin's *Sermons on Job*: 'Calvin thinks of the *imago dei* as having to do first of all and fundamentally with God's beholding, rather than man's.'<sup>37</sup> In Calvin's own words, 'God looks upon Himself, so to speak, and beholds Himself in man as in a mirror.'<sup>38</sup> Like being known by God, this gracious beholding, however, is restricted to the elect: 'When God beholds his image in us He does that not by looking at that which He has put into us by nature, but at that which He has put into us by grace.'<sup>39</sup> If belonging to God is a good relational definition,

34 Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed*, 252.

35 Cf. F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians*, 202: 'For Paul, there is no real distinction between being known by God and being chosen by him (Rom. 8:29).' The reference to Rom 8:29 has in mind the fact that there being 'foreknown' by God is associated with being called and predestined. Likewise Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, 229, paraphrases being known by God as 'having become objects of his favourable attention'.

36 T. F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1949), 77. Thanks are due to Robert Doyle for pointing out to me the relevance of this material.

37 T. F. Torrance, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, 74 and chapter six *passim*.

38 *Sermon on Job* 10:7f.

39 *Sermon on Job* 10:7f.

being known by God may be defined theologically as his gracious regarding of us as we are in Christ.

## Conclusion

Contrary to centuries of theological study, 'the knowledge of God' may well be best understood as God's knowledge of us rather than our knowledge of God.<sup>40</sup> Along with adoption, being known by God arguably represents the most personal and comprehensive blessing of salvation. But its importance goes well beyond soteriology and the doctrine of God, conceivably informing anthropology, psychology, spirituality and ethics in ways not explored in this article.

To ask a question central to doing theology in the classical tradition, what is 'the pastoral function'<sup>41</sup> of the Christian doctrine of being known by God? Even this short investigation of the brief comments of two theologians has highlighted its practical benefits. From Lewis we see that for the saved, to be known by God magnifies grace and promotes humility. From Bonhoeffer we learn that to a life marred by failure and disappointment, to be known by God supplies comfort and instills significance.<sup>42</sup>

## Abstract

Whereas knowing God is central to every version of Christian theology, little attention has been paid to the other side of the divine-human relationship. This introductory essay approaches the subject via the brief but poignant remarks of two twentieth-century authors appearing in a work of fiction and in a poem. If C. S. Lewis recognizes the primacy of being known by God, Dietrich Bonhoeffer helps define it and underscores its pastoral value. Both authors accurately reflect the main contours of the Bible's own treatment. Calvin's view of the image of God, which T. F. Torrance defines as 'God's gracious beholding of man as his child,' may be of assistance in defining what it means to be known by God.

---

40 Cf. 'the love of God.'

41 Cf. Ellen T. Charry, *'By the Renewing of Your Minds': The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997).

42 Thanks are due to Philip Kern for his helpful comments on an earlier draft. The author continues to work on the subject of being known by God and would welcome any intimations of its treatment in works of theology or literature.