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# The Identity and Vocation of Christians in the Theology of Karl Barth

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David Thang Moe

*Ph.D. Candidate in Historical-Theological Studies*

*Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky*

*Associate Editor, Missiology: An International Review*

## Introduction

Two fundamental questions play a crucial role in Barth's theological approach to the knowledge of God. The first question is ontological and the second epistemological. The ontological question is: how does God make Himself known to us? The answer to this question is "Jesus Christ." It is through the incarnation of Christ that we know God. Barth's famous claim is that "God makes Himself known to us through Himself."<sup>1</sup> Barth develops the ontological knowledge of God within the framework of God's self-revelation in his *CD I*. The second question is how do we know God? The answer to this epistemological question is faith or church. Barth does not prioritize one over the other because the two (Christ and Church) are basically important for Barth's theology of the knowledge of God.<sup>2</sup> There is no second without the first. The first is incomplete without the second. Barth develops the second question in his *CD III/3* in the section of 49.4.

While one agrees with Barth's approach to the knowledge of God from the perspective of God's objective revelation in Christ and the faith-experience of the church, what is missing is the question of whether Christians have "full knowledge of God." Do Christians have full knowledge of God? Can Christians also know God through other creatures? To answer these questions, my aim is to explore the identity and vocation of Christians in the theology of Barth. I will engage mainly the least read Barth's work, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*, volume 3. I intentionally do this because I want to discover some neglected themes in Barth's *CD 3*. The paper is divided into three parts. First, I will discuss

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1. This paper was originally presented at the Karl Barth Colloquium at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, N.J., August 9-11, 2017. I am grateful for the opportunity to present this paper and am indebted for insightful comments and questions I have received from the young Barthians from the University of Oxford, University of Aberdeen, Yale University, Duke University, Princeton Theological Seminary, Vanderbilt University, and Graduate Theological Union.

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, I.2, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 296. Barth's famous claim is: "God makes Himself known to us through Himself (Jesus Christ)."

2. For an excellent survey of the relationship between Christ and the Church, see Kimlyn J. Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2005), 95-129.

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how Barth makes the distinction between Christians and others. Second, I will explore Barth's threefold concept of faith, prayer, and obedience as the frameworks for the Christian identity and vocation. Third, I will examine some possible ways that other creatures have knowledge of God through their cultures and explore the relationship of Christian vocation and human vocation in the providence of God.

## Barth's approach to the distinction between Christians and others

In *CD III/3*, 49.4, Barth's main thesis is twofold. The first is the distinction between Christian identity and other creatures. The second is the vocation and attitude of Christians under the universal Lordship. I will first study Barth's theological concept of the distinction between Christians and other creatures. Barth states Christian identity:

What concerns us now is that the Christian alone as the creaturely subject which can join in a confession of the divine providence because it knows this providence, because it participates in the divine world-governance in this special and inward way.<sup>3</sup>

Barth does not simply say that Christians alone join in divine Lord-

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3. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Creation*, III.3, eds. W.G. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 239.

ship and providence, but he explains in what ways we can speak of Christians' participation in divine Lordship and providence. For Barth, to participate in the providence and Lordship of God depends on seeing and belonging to Jesus Christ. Barth boldly says: "Other creatures have eyes, but they do not see divine Lordship and providence due to lack of faith. Only Christians have open eyes to see it because of Jesus who offers them faith."<sup>4</sup> It is in this context that Barth regards faith not only as the distinguishing mark between Christians and other creatures, but also as the identity marker of Christians.

As we will illustrate later, Barth sees faith as the basis of Christian experience and knowledge of God. To quote his words, "in virtue of what he or she can see, the Christian is the one who has a true knowledge in the matter of the providence and universal Lordship of God."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Barth believes that Christians' participation in the providence and Lordship of God depends not only on their experience of God's Lordship in practice, but also on their true knowledge and affirmation of Christ as the Lord of the world. At one level, it is hard to argue against Barth's thesis on the Christian's true knowledge of the providence and universal Lordship of God from the perspective of faith. Consequently, some Christians, especially grassroots Christians, regard Christianity not as a religion, but rather as a relationship—an ontological relationship with God by faith.

Another concern we may draw from Barth's concept of the distinction between Christians and other creatures is the way he perceives of the former group as the inner community and the latter as the outer community. The Christian's participation in the providence and Lordship of God is "not from without (without faith), but from within."<sup>6</sup> This implies the idea that the Christian community is the God-knowing community of faith and the other community is the God-unknowing community of faithlessness.

Barth's concept of Christians' true knowledge of the providence and Lordship of God is not wrong, but too one-sided and restricted. He restricts the providence and universal Lordship of God exclusively to the knowledge and experience of Christians. Only by faith, can the Christian have *full knowledge* of the depth of the riches of God (Rom 11:33)? If the providence and Lordship of God is universal by the power and presence of the Spirit, can we not say that other creatures may also have the experience of God's Lordship and providence without knowing it? There is no mention of such claim in Barth's arguments. Yet his approach to the unique role of Christians under the providence and Lordship is our main task to explore and evaluate.

Barth develops the uniqueness of Christians within the threefold form of "faith, obedience, and prayer."<sup>7</sup> He illustrates the practice of this threefold form of faith, obedience and prayer by comparing it with the metaphor of the trinitarian modes of the divine being. Just as "the three trinitarian modes of the divine be-

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ing do not limit and complete each other as parts of the Godhead, so the threefold form of faith, obedience, and prayer complete each other in the one Christian attitude to the divine providence and Lordship rather than contrasting against each other."<sup>8</sup> He does not prioritize one over the other two, though he puts faith in the first order. Yet as compared with obedience and prayer, "faith has no primacy in value and importance, but it has a primacy in actual order."<sup>9</sup> In the following I will explore Barth's theological approach to Christian faith.

### **Barth's approach to faith: knowledge and acknowledgement**

How does Barth define Christian faith? He defines faith in at least three aspects. First, he defines faith as a "knowledge and acknowledgement of the Word of God as a Word spoken by God to us."<sup>10</sup> Barth refers to the Word of God as Jesus Christ who is different from all other words because Jesus makes God known to us. The knowledge of God is possible only through Jesus. The acknowledgement of God is possible through receiving the Word of God. In this sense, Barth defines "faith as the receiving of the Word of God."<sup>11</sup> Echoing Paul's words in Rom 10:17, Barth argues that faith as the receiving of the Word of God comes from hearing the Word of God. Since faith comes from hearing the Word of God, Barth believes faith is the consequence of the dialectical encounter between the work of God and the work of humans.<sup>12</sup>

By a dialectical encounter, Barth means God's giving of faith through Christ and human's response to it. Human response to the Word of God plays a vital role in the creation of faith. It is in this dialectical moment that faith is born. Faith never comes

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4. Ibid., 241.

5. Ibid., 242.

6. Ibid., 239.

7. Ibid., 245.

8. Ibid., 246.

9. Ibid., 246.

10. Ibid., 264.

11. Ibid., 246.

12. Ibid., 247.

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outside of this dialectical encounter between God and humans. Faith is not something humans can undertake alone. It is initiated by God and is responded to by humans. God is the primary actor, and the Christian are participants a with response to God's voice.

Second, Barth interestingly defines faith as liberation—liberation not in an outward sense of social justice, but rather in a transformative sense of inward awakening.<sup>13</sup> According to Barth, faith is always a historical event of determination and a liberating process in interdependence. Faith refers both to hearing the living Word of God through particular persons and the inward liberation from their own caprices through the ongoing work of the Spirit. In this respect, one needs to relate Christian faith to God's revelation. This is because Barth's concept of faith as liberation is grounded in his concept of revelation as a dialectical occurrence. God's revelation is dialectical in the sense that it exposes the sinful nature of humanity and liberates and transforms it into the likeness of Christ (Rom 8:29). Interestingly, Barth uses sunshine as an analogy to show how God's revelation exposes sinful nature. He states, "As a ray of sunshine reveals dirt in a dark room, so does God's revelation in Jesus reveal our sin in our hearts"<sup>14</sup> and liberates it. God's revelation is the manifestation of human sin and the liberation of Christian life.

When Christians are liberated through the revelation of God by the power of the Spirit, they see God, the world and themselves in a liberated manner. In this respect, one regards faith not only as the knowledge of God, but also as the knowledge of ourselves and the world in a new way. Barth has in mind some biblical examples, such as the liberating of Moses and the burning bush (Exod 3:13-15), the liberating of Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 19:1-22). These examples show that God's revelation is the liberating power of faith. Faith provides us with a new conviction of who God is and what it means to live according to His will for a universal providence and Lordship of justice and peace.

Third, but related to the second, Barth develops faith as an outward sense of liberation and commitment for God's providence and Lordship of justice and peace (salvation). An inward sense of faith liberation (conviction) is not complete without an outward

sense of faith liberation (commitment) or active participation in Christ's work of grace, salvation, and divine providence. It is through these two movements of faith that Christians truly participate in Christ's work of grace, salvation, and divine providence of world-governance.<sup>15</sup> How and why outward liberation of the world is actual and possible to Christians is my next task to indicate and evaluate.

### **Barth's approach to obedience: vocational ethics**

The second form of the Christian attitude is obedience. In his famous book *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, the American New Testament scholar Richard Hays argues that Barth was not merely a systematic theologian who develops doctrinal theology, but he was a theological ethicist who constructs Christian theological ethics in the name of one's obedience to the command of God.<sup>16</sup> Barth defines "obedience as the doing of the Word of God."<sup>17</sup> For Barth, the Word of God is not only to be preached as the foundation for Christian faith, but it is to be actualized. Barth puts faith alongside obedience. This is because faith and obedience are inseparable in the lives of the Christian. "In faith, one becomes a Christian, in obeying, one is a Christian."<sup>18</sup> As noted earlier, it is through faith that Christians have true knowledge of God, and through obedience that Christians represent the true followers of Christ. Barth's concept of Christian obedience is rooted in the cross of Christ. This is because, as Barth states, "the cross is where the decision of the love of God and the supreme obedience of Christ for salvation of the Christian and for the whole world was made."<sup>19</sup> Barth rightly writes:

When the Son of God, who was sent by the Father, does the Father's will on earth, and fulfills it to the end, what advantage or honor does He get because of it? He does the will of the Father simply because He is the Son. He does do it, and He has no choice not to do it. He does it necessarily. He would not be the Son of God if He did not do it. This is the greatest pattern of Christian obedience.<sup>20</sup>

In light of this, Barth further draws two lines of thought on the two different sides of Christian obedience. On the first side, Christian obedience is not an achievement, which gives the Christian merit or reward. In other words, Christian obedience to the Word of God is not for the reward of achievement. Rather Christian obedience is the result of what Christ has graciously achieved for the reward of Christian on the cross. Christians obey

13. Ibid., 247.

14. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, IV.2, eds. G.W Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1969), 403.

15. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.3., 248-249.

16. See, Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: N.Y.: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 225-238.

17. *Church Dogmatics*, III.3., 253.

18. Ibid., 254.

19. Ibid., 262.

20. Ibid., 254.

God because God not only rewarded Christians salvation, but also called and elected them to participate in God's mission of providence. In Barth's view, "ethics is the culmination of election because God's act of forming covenant partnership with the Christian requires us to ask what it is that God wants from humans."<sup>21</sup> Barth emphasizes that ethics deals with the command of God to Christian faith and Christian obedience to the command of God. This leads us to the second side.

On the second side, obedience, according to Barth, is not a choice, but an obligation.<sup>22</sup> Barth proposes the Christian ethics of obligation under the covenant of God's family and Father-Son relationship. Just as Jesus would not be the Son if He did not obey God the Father, so Christians are not true followers of Christ if they do not obey the command of Christ. Since Christian obedience is the ethics of obligation, it is not something that we can negotiate with God.<sup>23</sup> Here we can relate this to Moses who said, "all that the Lord has spoken to us, we will do and be obedient" (Exod 24:8).

Likewise, Jesus Himself said, "Blessed are those hear the word of God and obey it (Luke 11:28). In light of this, Barth believes hearing the Word of God is not enough, obeying the Word of God is necessary. In obedience to the Word of God, Christians are not the mere objects. God accompanies Christians in their daily works. Jesus commands Christians to obey to His Word and the Spirit directs them in the process of obedience. "The obedience of Christian means that he or she gives himself or herself to the Word of God and to the power and guidance of the Spirit."<sup>24</sup> Jesus never commands His disciples without His mutual abiding in them by the power of the Spirit. For example, Jesus' commission of His disciples is accompanied by His promise of being present with them (Matt 28:29-20). To demonstrate this, Barth uses the metaphor of Father-Son mutual relationship. As Barth states, the Father is not the oppressor and the Son the oppressed. Rather the Father uses the Son as the servant and savior of the world, thereby the Father participates. Likewise, "the Christian" according to Barth, "are not the hired servants and employees."<sup>25</sup> Rather, they are the chosen servants through whom God Himself participates in His providence and Lordship by the power of the Spirit.

Moreover, Barth regards obedience as a means to know who the Lord is. It is through obedience that Christians know the true Lordship of Christ and the authority of the Holy Spirit. Since Christian obedience is under the Lordship of Christ and the authority of the Spirit, any Christian practices of human lordship over the other stand against Christ's Lordship of justice and peace. Only Christ is one Lord. If Christ is the only and one Lordship, what the Christian ought to do is to totally submit their lives to

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Christ alone. In this respect, Barth uses obedience and submission interchangeably and argues that submission to Christ makes Christians enslaved and liberated.<sup>26</sup> In their submission to Christ, Christians become liberated or conscious of their vocation on the one hand, and they become enslaved to Christ's ordinances and rules on the other hand. It is in the context of Christians' submission to the command of Christ that Barth deals with what I would call "vocational ethics of Christians" in the providence of God.

In his *Church Dogmatics* III/4, Barth develops the relationship between vocational ethics and the command of God the creator. In the opening chapter of his *Church Dogmatic* III/4 under the title "ethics as a task of the doctrine of creation," Barth defines the relationship between vocational ethics and the command of God:

The task of special ethics in the context of the doctrine of creation is to grow to what extent the one command of the one God who is gracious to man [woman] in Jesus Christ is also the command of His creator and therefore already the sanctification of the creaturely action and abstention of man and [woman].<sup>27</sup>

Barth interestingly makes a distinction and relationship between *Beruf* as Christian daily vocation and *Berufung* as divine summons. While Barth considers *Beruf* (vocation) and *Berufung* (calling) as distinct on the one hand, and he also demonstrates how the twin terms are dialectically related to one another, on the other hand. However, Barth rightly claims that one must take the priority of *Berufung* over *Beruf*. The reason is that there can be no Christian vocation without divine calling. Christians' response to divine calling is equally important for Barth's theological understanding of Christian identity and vocation. He argues that *Berufung* connotes calling as the divine summons to His special freedom and obedience.<sup>28</sup> This calling is a new thing, in contrast to what a human "has been already on the basis of the creation

21. Ibid. See also Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God*, II.2. eds, G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1966), 510.

22. Ibid., 254.

23. Ibid., 255-256.

24. Ibid., 264.

25. Ibid., 260.

26. Ibid., 261-262.

27. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God*, III.4. eds, G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 3.

28. Ibid., 598.

and providence of God.”<sup>29</sup> *Berufung*, for Barth, implies more than a person’s enlightenment with the knowledge of the Word of God. For Barth, it is Christ who makes men and women Christians for the purpose of making His discipleship and to a life in direct fellowship with Him. Barth aptly puts it as follows:

If Christ is calling men [and women] makes them His men [and women], if they are given this special function in a fellowship of their being with His, then obviously the self-proclamation of Christ does not come last, but first and directly, to those who have to serve Him as witnesses.<sup>30</sup>

Calling or *Berufung* in this sense is a new thing which is added to what Christians are before God in the manner of command, freedom, and obedience. *Beruf*, on the other hand, implies calling in the sense of vocational ethics. Barth asserts that vocational ethics in the usual sense of the word means a particular position and function of a human in connection with the process of work, that is, his or her job, and then in the broader sense a whole group such positions and functions.<sup>31</sup> Barth defines *Beruf* in a broad sense:

A vocation in a comprehensive sense in which we are now using the term is proper to all men [and women] inasmuch as all are destined to be recipients of the divine calling and hearers of the divine command. They do not have a vocation, therefore, only when they take up a “vocation” in the narrower sense.<sup>32</sup>

Barth emphasizes that the center of vocation in the comprehensive manner is not to be found at the point of the vocation in the narrow sense. Central to Barth’s understanding of vocation is the question of how vocation or *Beruf* can be understood as a dialectical encounter in which God’s calling and Christians’ obedience to the divine calling meet. In this regard, Barth echoes Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s understanding of vocation as “the place of responsibility” where Christians respond to God’s calling.<sup>33</sup> But Barth does not understand responsibility or vocation as an employment. Barth considers vocation to be broader than employment. For Barth, *Beruf* is to be understood not simply as a profession but as the totality of human existence placed by God in a specific place and period of time. Vocational ethics is to be understood as one’s unique personhood and gift bestowed by God in a particular context for the mission of God’s creation and providence.<sup>34</sup>

Understanding vocational ethics in the context of Christians’ social participation in God’s reign of justice and peace, Barth also emphasizes the role of Christian prayer. The identity of Christian spiritual life, according to Barth, is defined by the practice of

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prayer.<sup>35</sup> I will now turn attention to Barth’s theological concept of Christian prayer.

### Barth’s approach to prayer: spirituality

The third, not the least, form of Christian attitude is prayer. Barth does not treat prayer simply as the other of faith and obedience. He argues that “basically, faith is prayer, obedience too is prayer.”<sup>36</sup> However, he believes we cannot do justice the distinctiveness of prayer if we simply think of it as the basic form of faith and obedience. When we think of prayer in this way, what is lacking is the center of prayer. For Barth, prayer is the center from which the other two flow and to which the other two return. In this sense, I wish to understand prayer as a Christian breath through which we inhale and exhale in our spiritual relationship with God. Prayer is the Christian attitude of obedience to and relationship with God. Barth’s different aspects of prayer can be identified.

First, Barth thinks of prayer as a Christian attitude of petition and penitence.<sup>37</sup> He emphasizes two kinds of Christian prayer of petition. In the first stance, it is the Christian confession of petition for God’s forgiveness. To pray in the Christian sense means fully to make a petition of Christian weaknesses and limitations and a penitence for God’s forgiveness. The end goal of such a kind of prayer is not to change God, but to change Christians to the extent that they would repent their sinful nature and renew their mind. In light of this, Barth sees petition and penitence as two centers of Christian prayer. For Barth, the attitude of petition and penitence is what makes Christian prayer different from other religious prayers. For example, the prayer of the Pharisees was full of praise and thanksgiving, but what is lacking is their attitudes of confession and repentance.<sup>38</sup>

Built on the Lord’s Prayer, which teaches, “Forgive us our trespasses” (Matt 6:12a), Barth emphasizes that the attitude of Christian petition for His forgiveness and renewing of their mind is inevitably important in their relationship with God.<sup>39</sup> To pray means to renounce allusions, weaknesses, and imperfections about

29. Ibid., 595.

30. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of God*, IV.III.2, eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 651.

31. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III.4, 599.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 598.

34. Ibid., 599-600.

35. Ibid., 87-115.

36. Ibid., 265.

37. Ibid., 267.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid., 268.

ourselves and to admit ourselves to God. While one must agree with Barth's right emphasis on the Christian petition and penitence for God's forgiveness, what is missing in his spiritual theology of Christian prayer is: whether God would still forgive us if we did not confess our sins. If God had forgiven us in Christ, why should we make a petition for God's forgiveness?

The second kind of Christian petition is a matter of "an asking, a seeking and a knocking, a desiring and a requesting presented to God."<sup>40</sup> This kind of prayer is rooted in Matt 7:7-8. In this text, Jesus not only urges His disciples, but also gives them promise. He said to His disciples, "ask, it will be given to you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened." Prayer is not asking for God's forgiveness, but asking for something, believing that God is the giver of good gifts to us. This kind of prayer is common to Christians, especially grassroots Christians who see prayer as asking and seeking something of God. There are two kinds of Christians who express their desires to God. One kind of Christians asks God for what they want. The other sees prayer as asking God for what they need. Barth's emphasis is on the latter.

Barth's concept of prayer as a matter of asking and seeking of something from God needs to be evaluated. If prayer is merely a matter of asking and seeking of something from God, can there be any problem of Christians' imposing their desires on God? Should the Christians expect everything from God as a result of their prayer? Unfortunately, Barth does not provide some explicit answers to such questions.

Finally, I discuss Barth's concept of prayer as adoration and praise of God.<sup>41</sup> Barth's concept of praise is not just a weekly Sunday worship of God, but a daily adoration of God. Barth's view of prayer as praise is complementary to the first two forms of prayer as petition and penitence. The first two forms of prayer enable Christians to be the receivers of forgiveness and gifts from God, whereas the third form of prayer enables Christians to be the giver of praise to God. While God is the *giver* and Christians are the *receivers* in the context of the first two forms of prayer, Christians are the *givers* and God is the *receiver* of praise from Christians in the context of the third form of prayer. Thus, prayer is not only to ask something from God, but to offer something (praise and thanksgiving) to God. Built on the first and last line of the Lord's Prayer ("hallowed be thy name; for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever"), Barth insists that "Christian prayer begins and ends with the praise of God."<sup>42</sup>

Barth asserts that we praise God for who He is and for His providence and Lordship. In thinking of God's daily providence and universal Lordship of love, it is essential for Christians to praise God from their hearts.<sup>43</sup> We must praise God for who He is (the creator, redeemer, and protector) and for what He has done and is

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doing still. Our praise of God flows from joy and gratitude. Our gratitude flows from our contentment with what God has done and is doing for us. There is no sincere praise of God without grateful heart, and no gratitude without being content with God's daily providence. What is missing in Barth's articulation of prayer as praise is the need and importance of Christians' contentment with God's daily providence. On a practical level, it is easier to praise God when good things come and is harder when things are not well. Unfortunately, Barth does not state the Christian attitude of praising God in the latter situation.

I would like to comment on Barth's doctrine of Christian prayer. I find Barth's concept of threefold concept of prayer as petition, seeking, and praising God persuasive for practicing the Christian attitude of ontological relationship with God. However, I find his view of prayer one-sided. It is one-sided in a way that he puts God on the listening side and Christians on the speaking side. I argue that true prayer must be practiced as a two-way communication between God and Christians. This is not to suggest that God should also pray so that Christians would listen to Him. Rather, the point I want to make here is: prayer is a time for a mutual relationship between God and Christians.

There is a time for Christians to pray and speak to God; and God listens to Christians. And there is a time for God to speak to Christians and Christians listen to Him. In light of the latter, I wish to add the Christian spiritual practice of meditation to the Christian attitude of prayer. Prayer and meditation are not synonymous, but they mutually interrelated to each other. Prayer allows Christians to speak to God, and God listens. Meditation enables God to speak to the Christians, and Christians must listen. Prayer without meditative listening to God's voice is not transformative. Too often, Christians over-emphasize prayer and neglect meditation. If prayer is not merely to request God for something, but to discern His will, it is essential for Christians to let God speak to them through meditation. The goal of prayer with meditation is not to transform the mind of God, but rather to transform the mind of the Christian into the likeness of Christ (Rom 8:29; 12:2) by the power of the Spirit. It is through the latter sense of

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40. Ibid., 286.

41. Ibid., 268.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

meditative prayer that faith can be practiced as “liberation” in the words of Barth.

### Conclusion—vocational reading of the Bible and the newspaper

Let me conclude this paper with Barth’s statement, which sums up the themes I have explored so far. His statement is: “In faith, Christians are the children of God; in obedience to the Word of God, the servants of Christ, in prayer the friends of God.”<sup>44</sup> I find this statement helpful for understanding Barth’s concept of Christian identity and vocation. I have shown that Barth sees faith as a distinguishing mark between Christians and other creatures. It is through faith that Christians have the knowledge of God. Faith is not only the knowledge of Jesus as Lord and Savior, but also the knowledge of ourselves as sinful Christians or as Martin Luther puts it, “we are justified sinners, yet sinful saints.” While one agrees with Barth on this point, what is lacking is: what kind of Christian knowledge of God he is referring to? Is he referring to a saving knowledge of God? If this is the case, then other creatures may have no saving knowledge of God, but they do have a general knowledge of God through creation (Rom 1:19-20).

Other creatures’ knowledge of God is not identical with Christian knowledge of God. But it is fair to note that they have a general experience of God’s Lordship without knowing it. It is important to assert that God’s providence and Lordship is not limited to the Christian community. To be sure, Christians’ knowledge of God is more explicit through Christ and the biblical witness. However, the questions I raise are: can Christians have a full knowledge of the depth of the riches of God by faith alone? Can Christians know the depth of the riches of God better through the cultures of other creatures (Rom 11:33-36)? Barth does not question the role of other creatures in the providence and Lordship of God. For him, faith is a distinguishing mark of Christian identity, but faith is not the only indicator for the full knowledge of the depth of the riches of God.

Apostle Paul, the greatest theologian in Christian history, humbly acknowledges that “we have a partial knowledge of God” (1 Cor 13:9). Since we have a partial knowledge of God, Christians should open their mind to learning the mystery of God from other creatures, who are God’s creation. There is the biblical evidence for God’s general or natural revelation through creation and conscience (Rom 1:19-20). As Gerald McDermott notes, “God’s revelation refers not only to the process of God disclosing His nature and purposes, but also to the knowledge of God that results from that disclosure.”<sup>45</sup> Built on an ontological and epistemological knowledge of God through Christ and through creation, I suggest that Christians should hold a two-fold mode of God’s revelation—“particular or special revelation” and “general

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**A**postle Paul, the greatest theologian in Christian history, humbly acknowledges that “we have a partial knowledge of God” (1 Cor 13:9). Since we have a partial knowledge of God, Christians should open their mind to learning the mystery of God from other creatures, who are God’s creation.

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or natural revelation.” While God’s general or natural revelation is available to all creatures and other faiths through nature and reason, God’s particular or special revelation through Christ is available to those Israel and the church with access to the Bible.<sup>46</sup> It is thus imperative for Christians to discern the nature and purpose of God’s universal providence and Lordship beyond the church. This leads us to the need of Christians’ vocational cooperation with other faiths for struggling for God’s universal providence of social and eco-shalom.

Although Barth does not explicitly talk about the need of Christians’ vocational cooperation with people of other faiths for interreligious struggling for social eco-justice and peace, he impressively addresses the concept of God’s operation of the world in and through two spheres—“Christian community and civil community”—for His divine providence of justice and peace. I suggest that Barth’s concept of God’s providential operation of the world in and through two spheres should be taken as a point of departure for developing the relationship between God and Christian community and the relationship between Christian community and other communities in God’s providence.

Barth asserts that “one sphere is direct and inner and the other indirect and outer.”<sup>47</sup> Christ is the center of both communities. The inner community represents the church or the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27), while the outer community represents society or the divine image-bearing community (Gen 2:7). Barth emphasizes that as the chosen community, the church knows Jesus as their Lord and lives vocationally in light of that knowledge of divine calling. Other creatures do not know Jesus as the Lord, but they are not outside of Christ’s universal providence and Lordship. Since God rules the world through the Christian community and civil community as two servants for His universal providence of social and eco-justice and peace (Rom 13:1-7), it is right to say that the vocation of other creatures is also significant for God’s providence

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44. Ibid., 286.

45. Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation, and Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 47.

46. Ibid., 45-90.

47. Ibid., 256-257. For a similar concept, see also Karl Barth, “The Christian Community and the Civil Community,” in *Community, Church and States: Three Essays* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 148-189.

of justice, creation care, and peace. The task of Christians is therefore not only to obey the Word of God and pray within the church, but also to make Christ's liberating Lordship known to the cultures of other creatures and to vocationally cooperate with them for the common good of public society outside the church where God is at work by the power of the Spirit.

This is an important concept we should critically and creatively develop for the future of Barth's public theology of God's providence and Lordship in a religiously pluralistic context.<sup>48</sup> Barth's theology tends to be more of what I would call "Christian trinitarian theology of religion rather than a trinitarian public theology of religions in the plural." However, his famous proposal for Christians' vocation of reading the Bible and the newspaper serves as an invitation for Christians' broader understanding of their identity and public vocation.<sup>49</sup> The Bible and the newspaper are our informative sources in different ways, though not equally, for our vocational discernments about what God is doing in history and in our today's society as creator, savior, and sustainer. To be clear, Barth does not put the Bible alongside the newspaper. Rather, he invites Christians to read both and interpret the newspaper from the perspective of the Bible. As Christians, our vocation is to reflect on both what the Bible says about the nature of God's creational providence and His liberating action for our practice of faith, on the one hand, and what the newspaper reveals to us about God's kairological calling through the contemporary socio-political and public issues of civil society where Christians and people of other faiths live and share their human lives as the distant and proximate neighbors.<sup>50</sup>

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48. For a critical reading of Barth in a religiously pluralistic context, see my article, David Thang Moe, "Karl Barth against Religion, not Religions: Constructing His Dialectical Theology of Divine Revelation and Human Religion in Asia," in *Asia Journal of Theology*, Vol. 31. No. 1. (April 2017): 113-140. See also David Thang Moe, "Is Barth a Liberation Theologian? New Perspectives on Barth in Asia," in *The Expository Times*, vol. 131, no. 4 (January 2020): 137-152.

49. Barth's comments on reading the Bible and newspaper, see the *Time Magazine* piece on Karl Barth, published on Friday, May 31, 1963.

50. Moe, "Is Barth a Liberation Theologian?" 137-152.