

**‘KNOWN BY GOD’**  
THE MEANING AND VALUE  
OF A NEGLECTED BIBLICAL CONCEPT<sup>1</sup>

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**Summary**

*Despite the fact that being known by God is a critical concept in biblical theology it is sorely neglected in biblical exegesis and theology. This introductory article seeks to revive interest in the doctrine by reflecting on its definition and by considering its pastoral function in the Bible and in early Jewish texts. It argues that being known by God is roughly equivalent to three related notions: belonging to God, being loved or chosen by God, and being a child or son of God. With respect to the use to which it is put in the relevant texts, whereas not being known by God adds severity to dire warnings, being known by God promotes humility and supplies comfort and security. The implications of a biblical doctrine of being known by God for Christology, Anthropology, and Ethics are also briefly considered.*

**1. Introduction**

***The ‘Cinderella’ of Theology***

No one would deny the centrality of knowing God to biblical theology. Yet few treatments of the doctrines of God and salvation acknowledge that, as with every relationship, the knowledge of God has two sides: believers know God and are also known by him. Whereas knowing

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God is the focus of countless academic and popular books and articles, being known by God has been barely noticed.<sup>2</sup>

At first blush the biblical data appears to justify this state of affairs. Compared with knowing God, the Bible speaks explicitly of God knowing human beings only rarely, less than twenty in comparison with several hundred. However, references to being known by God typically appear at critical points in the biblical narrative: in the Old Testament, Abraham (Gen. 18:19), Moses (Exod. 33:12), David (2 Sam. 7:20), Jeremiah (Jer. 1:5) and the nation Israel (Amos 3:2; Hos. 13:5) are all known by God; and in the New Testament being known by God defines Christian existence (Gal. 4:8-9; 1 Cor. 8:3), is a criterion of the last judgement (Matt. 7:23 ['I never knew you']; 25:12; cf. Luke 13:27) and is a measure of eschatological glory (1 Cor. 13:12 ['then I shall know, even as I have been fully known']).

As significant as this notion may be in the Bible, English versions often obscure it by not translating it literally and commentaries usually pass over it with little explanation. Commentators typically treat its meaning as self-evident and ignore the possible affective impact on the reader. Likewise, major treatments of Old Testament and New Testament theology characteristically fail to reflect on the notion. However, along with presenting a formidable interpretative challenge, I am convinced that the idea of being known by God sheds light on the Christian's relationship with God and holds considerable promise for several areas of theology.

### ***Prolegomena***

A few comments on method will help set the course for our investigation of the theme of being known by God in the Bible.

First, when speaking of being known by God we must distinguish relational from factual knowledge. Some languages mark these two notions at the lexical level. German, for example, uses *kennen* and *wissen* to refer roughly to knowing someone and knowing something

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<sup>2</sup> 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. My own interest in the subject began with an article on isolated remarks in two twentieth-century authors: Brian S. Rosner, 'Known by God: C.S. Lewis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer', *EQ* 77.4 (2005): 343-52.

respectively. Unfortunately the Hebrew, Greek, and English languages use the same verbs ‘to know’ for both.

God’s factual knowledge, so to speak, refers to the idea that he knows everything about everyone at all times. All of Scripture teaches God’s general omniscience in this sense. God knows our ways, days, thoughts, the secrets of our hearts and so on. ‘God knows,’ ὁ θεὸς οἶδεν, a phrase repeated three times in Paul’s letters, testifies to this conviction. In 2 Corinthians 11:11 Paul uses it to convince his readers that he loves them: ‘God knows I do.’ Even more telling is 2 Corinthians 12:2-3 where Paul affirms that ‘God knows’ something that Paul himself does not know (namely, whether during mystical experience the apostle was in or out of his body). 1 John 3:20 affirms God’s omniscience bluntly: ‘he knows everything’ (RSV), γινώσκει πάντα.

If, to use the language of 2 Corinthians 5:11, God’s omniscience means that ‘*what we are* is known to God,’ God’s relational knowledge means that ‘*who we are* is known to God.’ As we will see, according to the Bible, although God knows about everyone, he does not know everyone in the intimate sense of personal relationship. Psalm 138:6 can speak of God knowing the proud ‘from afar,’ but the righteous up close (literally, he ‘looks upon them’). Similarly, according to Matthew and Luke’s Gospels Jesus will say to some at the Last Judgement, ‘I never knew you’ (Matt. 7:23; 25:12; cf. Luke 13:27). If God’s omniscience is an attribute of God that speaks of his transcendence and overlaps with his omnipresence,<sup>3</sup> his knowing us concerns his immanence and is related to his love.

Whereas at most points in the Bible God’s factual and relational knowledge are clearly distinguished, Psalm 139 is a rare case where the two overlap. Verse 1 affirms both types of knowledge with the prayer, ‘you have searched me (factual knowledge) and you know me (relational knowledge).’ The next three verses affirm that God knows when the psalmist sits down and rises up, what he is about to say, and so on. Verses 5-12 then highlight God’s presence as an explanation for him knowing these things: ‘You hem me in—behind and before’ (v. 5a). Further explanation is offered in verses 13-18, where God’s

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. the juxtaposition of omniscience and omnipresence in Ps. 139:1-4 (‘You know when ...’), followed by vv. 5-10 (‘You hem me in ...’).

knowledge of the psalmist originates from and completes a divine knowing begun while still in his mother's womb.

Next it is important to recognise that certain texts that *prima facie* assert that God knows certain people may not in fact be referring to his relational knowledge but instead to his omniscience. Three such 'furfies' or false positives, may be noted:

- 1) Hosea 5:3 in the NRSV reads, 'I know Ephraim,' which is a literal translation of both the MT and the LXX. However, the context reveals that what God knows is Ephraim's, or Israel's, idolatry: 'Israel is not hidden from me. Ephraim has turned to prostitution; Israel is corrupt.' The NIV's more interpretative translation of the words in question is accurate. It quotes God as saying not, 'I *know* Ephraim,' but rather, 'I know *all about* Ephraim.'
- 2) John 2:23-24 claims that 'he [i.e. Jesus] knew (γινώσκειν) all men.' As in the previous example, the context clarifies that the text is not, however, in fact claiming personal knowledge for Jesus. Verse 25 gives the explanation for what is meant by the words, 'Jesus knew all men,' namely, that he 'knew (ἐγίνωσκειν) what was in man.' In context this refers to the nature of their believing in him, which led Jesus not to 'believe' in them.
- 3) In 2 Corinthians 6:9 Paul describes himself as 'known, yet regarded as unknown' (NIV). Whether the apostle is claiming to be known by God or by someone else in the first part of this verse is uncertain. Probably Paul is claiming that his apostolate is recognised by some people, but not by others. As Kruse notes, the verb 'to know' in 2 Corinthians 6:9 is ἐπιγινώσκω, 'which Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 16:18, where he urges the Corinthians to 'recognise' certain Christian fellow workers'.<sup>4</sup>

### ***The Shape of the Investigation***

The present study considers every explicit reference to being known by God in the Bible. Each of these texts contributes to our exposition of the meaning and/or value of our theme in some way. However, we err if we assume that texts that use the Greek or Hebrew words usually translated 'to know' exhaust the Bible's treatment of the subject. An adequate study of a theme in biblical theology can rarely be satisfied with the data thrown up by simple word studies. Just as some texts that

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<sup>4</sup> Colin Kruse, *2 Corinthians* (Tyndale; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987): 134.

use the verb ‘to know’ are not really talking about being known by God in the absolute sense (as noted above), so too a number of texts that do not use the verb ‘to know’ contribute to our subject. These include terms such as the verbs ‘to remember,’ ‘to see,’ ‘to choose,’ ‘to recognise’ and ‘to forget’.

A final comment on method concerns non-canonical early Jewish literature. It is advisable when doing biblical theology, especially on subjects as relatively obscure as being known by God, to consult the texts of ancient Judaism as an early witness to the history of biblical interpretation, of the development of the history of ideas. Relevant texts on the subject of being known by God are found in several books of the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha and in the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The same two-part question that will guide our study of the biblical texts must also be posed to this Jewish material: *What is the meaning of the concept of being known by God and to what use is it put?*<sup>5</sup> As it turns out, at many points in our exposition of the Bible’s teaching, to which we now turn, Jewish texts clarify and confirm the major findings.

## 2. The Definition of Being Known by God

What then does it mean to be known by God? Defining being known by God is less straightforward than defining some other biblical concepts. Although not numerous, texts which speak of being known by God: (1) punctuate the canon, turning up from Genesis to 2 Timothy, appearing in every major genre; (2) refer both to individuals and to the nation of Israel and the church; and (3) appear in a variety of settings, from creation, to personal experience, to the Final Judgement and the eschaton. Further, since ‘being known’ is such an intimate and emotive concept, not unlike a metaphor it is capable of varied and flexible application. So we should not necessarily expect a neat and even definition that fits every instance.

Rather than press for a uniform sense, and fall prey to the semantic fallacy of totality transfer, we shall propose three overlapping meanings, moving from the general to the more specific. Although there is no such thing as a true synonym, in each case the definitions

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<sup>5</sup> In other words, what is the meaning and value of being known by God in the Bible?

consist of a comparison of being known by God to a roughly equivalent concept. Contextual clues support linking our understanding of being known by God to three related notions: (1) belonging to God; (2) being loved or chosen by God; and (3) being a child or son of God.

### *Belonging to God*

In the most general sense to be known by God signals God's ownership of an individual or group. In the Old Testament, in Numbers 16:1-35, during the story of the rebellion of Korah and his followers, Moses explains that God will effect a separation that will end the revolt. The first criterion of judgement mentioned is in LXX verse 5: ἔγνω ὁ θεὸς τοὺς ὄντας αὐτοῦ; literally, 'God knows those who belong to him'.<sup>6</sup> This affirmation is quoted virtually verbatim in 2 Timothy 2:19: 'the Lord knows those who are his' (NIV).<sup>7</sup> Twice in Numbers 16 the same thought is expressed with the verb to 'choose,' a connection we will explore in the following section: 'the one the Lord chooses' will be saved (vv. 5 and 7; בַּחַר /ἐκλέγω). At this point we simply note that being known and belonging to God seem to be equivalent. Walther Eichrodt came to the same conclusion: 'God knows his people ... that is to say, he has introduced them into a permanent relationship of mutual belonging.'<sup>8</sup> Adolf Schlatter likewise surmised that to be known by God is to be 'God's property'.<sup>9</sup>

None of the New Testament texts using the verb 'to know' makes the explicit connection between being known by God and belonging to him. However, the link is implicit in John's Gospel. In the Good Shepherd discourse of chapter 10 Jesus makes the claim in verse 14 that 'I know my sheep,' which is reinforced in verse 16 with the words, 'they listen to my voice.' In this regard it is striking that in John 8:47 Jesus makes a kindred observation that certain people 'hear what God says'. On this occasion the group is described as 'those who belong to God'. According to the Fourth Gospel then, those who attend to the words of Jesus and God can be variously described as those known by Jesus (10:14) and those who belong to God (8:47).

<sup>6</sup> The MT uses the verb יָדַע, but in the sense of 'make known' (NRSV) or 'show' (NIV).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. JB: 'The Lord knows those who are his own.'

<sup>8</sup> Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament: Volume Two* (London: SCM, 1967): 292, commenting on Hos. 13:5.

<sup>9</sup> German: 'Gottes Eigentum'. Adolf Schlatter, *Paulus, der Bote Jesu: Eine Deutung seiner Briefe an die Korinther* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1985; orig. 1934): 253.

***Chosen by God***

The link between being known by God and divine election is introduced in the first explicit reference to God's relational knowledge in the Bible. In Genesis 18:19, in connection with the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promise, God explains his grand plans for the patriarch ('Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations of the earth will be blessed through him;' 18:18) with the words, 'for I have known him'. That God's choice of Abraham is on view is clear from other numerous references in Genesis pertaining to election and the covenant. In Genesis 12:1ff., for instance, God's promise to Abraham is to make *him* into a great nation, to bless *him*, to make *his* name great and so on, in distinction from blessing someone else. And God's selection of a particular line of seed turns out to be the backbone of the plot of Genesis 12–50. Thus it is understandable that English versions, such as the RSV and NIV, translate Genesis 18:19, 'for I have chosen him,' even though the MT and LXX have the verb 'to know,' ידע and οἶδα respectively.

Two more Old Testament texts connect being known by God and being chosen by him. In the previous section we noted the use of the verb 'to choose' in relation to the judgement of the nation over the rebellion of Korah: the one God knows (v. 5) is 'the man the Lord chooses...' (16:5, 7). Also noteworthy is Amos 3:2, where in the context of the salvation from Egypt God reminds the nation: 'You only have I known of all the families of the earth.' Again the English versions interpret the sense in terms of divine election; NIV translates: 'You only have I chosen.'

In the New Testament, in the context of the historical outworking of the electing love of God, the apostle affirms in Romans 8:29 that 'those God foreknew (προέγνω) he also predestined'. As a synonym for election in this verse, God's foreknowledge refers to the setting of his love upon the elect in advance. Knowledge here carries the sense of intimate relationship, as in the famous euphemism for sexual intercourse in Genesis 4:1, 'Adam *knew* Eve.' Both the eternal purpose of God and mutual love relations are apparent in the broader context of Romans 8, with the love of God for his people appearing climactically in verse 39 as the complement to the description of believers in verse 28 as 'those who love God'. Both the love of God and predestination are crystallised in the notion of being 'foreknown' by God. Thus, to be

known by God, is to be loved and chosen by him. As F. F. Bruce observed, 'For Paul there is no difference between being known by God and being chosen by him (Rom. 8:29).'<sup>10</sup>

### *Child of God*

If Eichrodt and Schlatter define being known by God in terms of belonging to him, and Bruce locates its meaning in divine election, John Calvin offers a third definition. Without offering support or elaboration, Calvin proposed that '[t]o be known by God ... simply means to be counted among His sons.'<sup>11</sup> The evidence for connecting being known by God with the doctrine of adoption is in fact more widespread and richly suggestive than either for belonging to God or being chosen by God.

A link between being known by God and being his child is clear in two Second Temple Jewish texts. The messianic hymn that is Psalms of Solomon 17 depicts the anointed King, the son of David, gathering a holy people and judging both the tribes of Israel and the nations. In this context verse 27b indicates that the remnant of Israel need not fear, translated literally, '[f]or he [i.e. the Messiah] shall know them, that they are all sons of their God.' The following verses supply further encouragement with the reassurance that the messianic king will resettle the tribes of Israel in the land and subjugate the nations under them (verses 28-32).

The link between being known by God and being his child is also implicit in the Dead Sea Scrolls, in the hymn of 1QH xvii. In an extensive psalm of lament, the author expresses his confident faith in the midst of many troubles with a reference to being known by God:

In you I will be guarded from every [foe,  
[you will be] salvation for me unto eternity.  
For you have known me since my father,  
from the vitals [you have established me,  
[from the womb of ] my mother you have filled me,

<sup>10</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982): 202.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996): 173. The three major studies of divine adoption do not mention the link: James M. Scott, *Adoption as Sons of God* (WUNT 2.48; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck]), 1992; Trevor J. Burke, *Adopted into God's Family: Exploring a Pauline Metaphor* (NSBT 22; Nottingham: Apollos, 2006); and Peter Balla, *The Child-Parent Relationship in the New Testament and Its Environment* (WUNT 155; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 2003).

from the breasts of her who conceived me  
your compassion has always been with me (29-30)

The juxtaposition of being known by God with references to his father and mother suggests that the author conceives of God knowing him as a parent knows their child. This is reinforced a few lines later, when he contrasts the care God has shown him to that of his human parents. Poignantly, the author observes that if his mother did not know him and his father let him down, at least God knew him. Again he expounds God's relational knowledge using imagery of a mother's love.

*For my mother did not know me,  
and my father abandoned me to you.  
Because you are father to all the sons of your truth.  
In them you rejoice,  
like one full of gentleness for her child,  
and like a wet-nurse,  
you clutch to your chest all your creatures (35-36).*

Moving to the biblical texts, in terms of biblical theology there are two great moments of divine adoption in the Old Testament: (1) God adopts Israel as his son at the time of the Exodus (Exod. 4:22; Deut. 32:10; Hos. 11:1; cf. Rom. 9:4); and (2) God adopts the king of Israel as his son in the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7:14; 1 Chron. 17:13; cf. 1 Chron. 28:6 [of Solomon]; Ps. 2:7).<sup>12</sup> As we shall see below, both are linked to being known by God.

Two references to being known by God appear in contexts that specifically mention the salvific event of the exodus. As noted above, when Amos 3:2 refers to God's election of Israel, 'you only have I known,' is preceded immediately by the reminder that Israel is the people God 'brought up out of Egypt' (3:1b). Additionally, Hosea 13:4-5 sets God's knowing the nation in the context of the same saving event: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt. ... I knew you in the desert.'

Most significantly, the Davidic covenant itself in 2 Samuel 7 supports the nexus of being adopted by God and being known by God. Following David's offer to build God's 'house' (in the sense of temple) being trumped by God's promise to build David's 'house' (in the sense of dynasty), God promises to adopt David's offspring who will succeed

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Roy E. Ciampa, 'Adoption,' *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, (ed. T. D. Alexander, B. Rosner; Leicester: IVP, 2000): 376.

him on the throne (v. 14). Amidst the sons of God, who are the nation of Israel, the Davidic king will be the son of God par excellence (cf. Ps. 2:7). In the wake of this overwhelming news and the resulting feelings of inadequacy, David understandably asks: ‘Who am I, O Sovereign Lord, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?’ (7:18b; cf. 1 Chron. 17:16b).<sup>13</sup> David’s answer is simple and profound; he prays: ‘What more can David say to you? For *you know your servant*, O Sovereign Lord?’ (7:20a; cf. 1 Chron. 17:18b). For David, when self-knowledge left him perplexed, being known by God offered genuine reassurance.

Isaiah 49 contains a famous passage promising the restoration of Israel. An oracle of salvation begins with words of comfort in verse 8: ‘This is what the LORD says: “In the time of my favour I will answer you, and in the day of salvation I will help you.”’ However, verse 14 strikes a note of despair, with the nation, represented by Zion, crying out: ‘the LORD has forsaken me, the LORD has forgotten me’. Verse 15 responds with a rhetorical question that sets up a stunning assertion:

‘Can a mother forget the baby at her breast  
and have no compassion on the child she has borne?  
Though she may forget, I will not forget you!’

Isaiah 49:15 compares God’s relationship with his people to that of a mother and her child, and it characterises the bond in question as that of a mother not forgetting, or remembering, her child. The figurative nature of the language cautions against reading too much into this verse. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that since ‘to remember’ here a synonym of relational knowing, the verse may be read as affirming God’s gracious attention in a context of parental commitment and affection, supplying more evidence for being known by God being employed in a filial context.

In the New Testament two Pauline texts suggest that being known by God should be understood as equivalent to being the sons of God. The broader context of Romans 8:29, ‘foreknown by God,’ includes no

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<sup>13</sup> The ultimate existential question of personal identity, ‘who am I?’, appears five times in the Bible and in each case it expresses submissive humility. Twice here at the giving of the Davidic covenant it is met with the answer, ‘God knows me’. David asks it on two other occasions: when Saul offers his daughter, Merab, to him in marriage (1 Sam. 18:18); and when he gives thanks to God for the gifts for the building of the temple (1 Chron. 29:14). The other questioner is Moses who asks, ‘who am I?’, in response to his commission to confront Pharaoh (Exod. 3:11).

less than three references to adoption. First, Israel's 'adoption as sons' appears at the head of Paul's list of the nation's privileges in 9:4. Secondly, the adoption of believers in Christ, who receive 'the Spirit of sonship' and cry 'Abba, Father,' is noted in 8:15. But most importantly for our purposes, the goal of the predestination to which those whom God foreknew are bound in 8:29 is 'to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.' Here we see both Old Testament moments of adoption coalesce in their New Testament fulfilment; the sonship of the new people of God is by virtue of God's unique Son. As Ephesians 1:5 puts it, 'he destined us for adoption as his children *through Jesus Christ*.' Of interest here is the fact that Romans 8:29 juxtaposes being known by God with being adopted by God.

The second New Testament text to relate being known to adoption is Galatians 4:8-9. This text is perhaps the most self-conscious and 'deliberate' reference to being known by God in the Bible. Here Paul at first writes of believers knowing God, but then offers, in the words of F. F. Bruce, a 'swift correction':<sup>14</sup> 'Formerly, when you did not know God ... But now that you know God—or *rather are known by God*.' While most commentators ponder the rhetorical nature of Paul's ploy here, the broader context is ignored as offering no help for understanding Paul's remarks more accurately.

Most English Bibles start a new section with Galatians 4:8ff.; the NIV for example gives 4:8-20 the heading, 'Paul's Concern for the Galatians.' In the light of the Old Testament and Jewish texts cited above that relate being known to adoption, it is intriguing to notice that the eleven verses before Galatians 4:8-9, that is, 3:26-4:7, concern divine adoption. In the NIV the section is accurately entitled, 'Sons of God,' and these verses are indeed the longest exposition of divine adoption in the Bible.

It is reasonable then to assume that when Paul describes the Galatian Christians in 4:8-9 he has not left the theme of adoption behind. The fact that the slavery/freedom motif of 4:1, 2, 7 is carried forward in 4:8-9 supports this contention. Paul's preference for 'being known by God' over 'knowing God' as a description of them is thus perfectly explicable: it fits better with their identity as sons of God, which he has

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<sup>14</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on Galatians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982): 202.

just spent so much effort expounding. NIV would do well to commence ‘Paul’s Concern for the Galatians’ with 4:12 and to include 4:8-11 with 3:26–4:7, under the heading, ‘Sons of God’.

Compared with the first two definitions, understanding being known by God as a parent knows their child deepens our grasp of the concept. Belonging to God is a rather general and ambiguous notion. In what realm does the ownership pertain? Do we belong to God as a piece of furniture belongs to its owner, or as a husband or wife belongs to their partner, or in some other sense? The association of being known by God with divine adoption marks the belonging of the one who is known as carrying a filial sense rather than a nuptial or some less personal sense. Even the idea of being chosen by God is non-specific and less personal in comparison with adoption.

Further, being known by God as his child makes good sense in the light of personal experience. In human relationships parents give their children their identity by knowing them. Children are named by and receive their earliest experiences from their parents. Parents come to know their child’s personality, likes and dislikes, physical capability, needs and desires. Indeed, a child’s wellbeing depends less on knowing his or her parents than by being known by them. As we shall see below, to be known by God as his child is of immense practical value to the one who is part of his family.

### *All Three Meanings in a Single Text*

The interrelatedness of all three ideas associated with being known by God (i.e. belonging to God, being loved or chosen by God, and being a child of God) is confirmed by their overlapping appearance in one document, namely in the late first- or early second-century text, the Odes of Solomon. Clearly Jewish in tone and perspective, the Odes are nonetheless probably a collection of early Christian hymns. Being known by God appears three times: 8:12, 13, and 41:2.

In 8:8-19 Christ speaks and opens with the call to ‘Hear the word of truth, and receive the knowledge of the Most High’ (8:8). In 8:10-11a reciprocal thoughts, that is, identical ideas expressed in both the active and passive voices, underscore the appeal to Christ’s followers: ‘*Keep my mystery, you who are kept by it; keep my faith, you who are kept by it. And understand my knowledge, you who know me in truth.*’ The description of Christ’s followers as ‘you who know me in truth’ (v. 11) sets up the thought of Christ knowing his followers in 8:12 and 13: ‘I

know them'; 'Before they had existed, I knew them.' The imperatives to 'keep' and 'know' are bolstered by the indicatives of being 'kept' and 'known'. We will return to this rhetorical strategy when investigating the function of being known by God (see section on 'humility' below).

What being known by God means, or is at least closely associated with, in the Odes of Solomon is made clear in the immediate contexts of the three references to being known by God. The three proposed meanings of belonging to God, election and adoption are each present:

- 1) Belonging to God in 8:18a: 'I willed and fashioned mind and heart; and *they are my own*.'
- 2) Chosen by God in 8:18b: 'And upon my right hand I have set *my elect ones*.'
- 3) Adoption in both 8:14: '*my own breasts* I prepared for them;' and 41:2: 'And *his children* shall be known by him.'

### 3. The Pastoral Function of Being Known by God

Having considered the meaning of 'being known by God,' what is its value? In other words, to what use is the concept of being known by God put in the Bible, and in selected early Jewish texts? To borrow Ellen Charry's phrase, what is the 'pastoral function' of this doctrine?<sup>15</sup> Three purposes may be inferred from its varied usage. Whereas not being known by God (1) adds severity to dire warnings, being known by God (2) promotes humility and (3) supplies comfort and security.

#### *Warning*

On four occasions in the New Testament the idea of being known by God is used negatively. Certain groups of unnamed individuals are told that they are not known by God. In every case the effect is to render an ominous warning even more frightening.

In 1 Corinthians 14:37 Paul issues a warning to the Corinthian church who perceive themselves to have a gift of discernment to confirm that his instructions in the previous paragraphs were not simply the informed opinions of a Christian leader, but 'the Lord's

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<sup>15</sup> Ellen T. Charry, *'By the Renewing of Your Minds': The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997).

command'. In verse 38 Paul makes a play on words<sup>16</sup> which is open to various interpretations: 'Those who ignore this will themselves be ignored,' εἰ δέ τις ἀγνοεῖ, ἀγνοεῖται. Barrett translates: 'If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized.' The question is, not recognised by whom, by God or by someone else? Barrett thinks Paul means 'he does not recognize the man in question as inspired in his opinion, not that he does not recognize him as a Christian.'<sup>17</sup> However, the tone of the section points to a more serious threat. BDAG translates: 'anyone who disregards (it [i.e. Paul's teaching]), is disregarded (by God).' In other words, Paul intends a covert allusion to God's judgement in this verse. Hays points to similar scriptural statements 'announcing God's eschatological punishment on those who reject the word of God' where the terms of judgment correspond to the original rejection by the person being judged, such as:

1 Samuel 15:26—'You have *rejected* the word of the LORD, and the LORD has *rejected* you as king over Israel!'<sup>18</sup>

Mark 8:38—'If any of you are *ashamed of me* and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be *ashamed of you* when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.'

To be disregarded or not known by God in 1 Corinthians 14:38 is thus the equivalent of final rejection by God.

A similar use of the concept of God's relational knowledge is found in Last Judgement scenes in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In each case the concluding, solemn verdict of condemnation includes the denial by Jesus the judge of ever having known the individuals concerned:

- 1) The Sermon on the Mount, in the judgement of false prophets by their fruit: 'Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evil-doers!'' (Matt. 7:23);
- 2) The Parable of the Ten Virgins, in response to the foolish virgins: 'But he replied, "I tell you the truth, I don't know you."' (Matt. 25:12);

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<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Lang, *Die Briefe an die Korinther* (Das Neue Testament Deutsch; Göttingen and Zürich: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986): 201.

<sup>17</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Black's NT Commentaries; London: A & C Black, 1971): 334.

<sup>18</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1997): 244.

3) The Parable of the Narrow Door, in response to those knocking outside: ‘But he will reply, “I don’t know you or where you come from. Away from me, all you evil-doers.”’ (Luke 13:27).

In all three texts the seriousness of Jesus’ not knowing those he condemns is reinforced by various means, including their description as ‘evil-doers,’ Jesus’ insistence that his words must not be taken lightly (he speaks ‘the truth’, ‘plainly’) and the stern words of dismissal, ‘Away from me.’ Making Jesus’ knowledge of a person the decisive criterion of judgement is particularly disturbing: ‘I never knew you.’ The verdict is highly personal, shatteringly brief, yet comprehensive, and it places the decision fully out of the condemned’s reach. What can they do about not being known? Any appeal against this judgement would be futile.

In terms of other New Testament depictions of the Last Judgement, to be told, ‘I never knew you,’ ranks alongside the Great White Throne Judgement of Revelation 20 for graveness. In Revelation people are condemned for not having their name written in the Book of Life. Such measures underscore the grace of God as the sole grounds for those who are saved; you can hardly take any credit for having your name in a list compiled before you were born or for being known by God.

### ***Humility***

Several times in the Bible being known by God is used as a motivation to humility. These texts typically combine the affirmation that certain people know God with the admission that God knowing them has the primacy.

In Hosea 13:4-5 the prophet, playing on the verb to know (יָדַע) 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. The superiority of being known by God over knowing God is reinforced by the repetition of the first person singular pronoun: ‘I am the Lord your God who brought you out 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 setting, we might say, knowing God means God knows us.

Three Pauline texts have a similar take on the knowledge of God. 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 (εἰδότες) God, you were slaves ... but now that you know (γνόντες) God, or rather are known by God (μᾶλλον δὲ γνωσθέντες ὑπὸ θεοῦ) (NIV).

Burton's explains well the force of the words 'or rather': '[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>19</sup> In other words, in Galatians 4:8-9, the words, without denying their knowledge of him, put the accent on God's knowledge of the Galatian Christians. Paul reminds them that being known by God takes precedence over knowing God.

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>20</sup> Not only does God know us better than we know him, he knows us better than we know ourselves.<sup>21</sup>

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 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

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<sup>19</sup> 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.

<sup>20</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Black's NT Commentaries; London: A and C Black, 1971): 307.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. David's 'who am I?'—'you know me'; John 21:17; 1 John 3:20. In Gen. 16:13b—Sarai acknowledges that her apprehension of the Lord is made possible by his apprehension of her. See esp. repetition of the verb 'to see': 'She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me."'

is deliberately given a different turn'.<sup>22</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 them as a way of deflating the pride of the Corinthian 'know-it-all'. 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.

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. After all, the fragility of human knowledge of God is frequently underscored in the Bible: 'No one knows God except the Spirit of God' (1 Cor. 2:11b; cf. Rom. 8:27), for God 'dwells in unapproachable light' (1 Tim. 6:16). We know God truly, but not fully. 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>23</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>24</sup> Such constructions highlight the grace of God and promote the appropriate human response of humble gratitude.

### ***Comfort and Security***

Although to my knowledge little has been written on the subject of being known by God, a few authors draw attention in passing to the comfort it affords. Richard Baxter called being known by God 'the full and final comfort of a believer'<sup>25</sup> and J. I. Packer claims that there is 'unspeakable comfort' in it.<sup>26</sup> According to C. K. Barrett, to be known by God 'is the all-important truth, for when God knows ... [a] man, he acts on his behalf'.<sup>27</sup>

In another group of biblical and Jewish texts the references to being known by God appear in contexts offering reassurance and consolation

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<sup>22</sup> Hans Conzelmann, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Hermeneia; translated by James W. Leitch; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975): 141. See also Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 139.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, 138, on 1 Cor. 8:3.

<sup>24</sup> The handing over in Rom. 6:17 is not 'that pattern of teaching' to the Christians, but the reverse. Cf. the old fashioned way of talking about becoming a Christian in terms of 'being saved'. See too the Odes of Solomon 8:8-13 discussed below.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Practical Works of Rev. Richard Baxter: Volume 15* (London: James Duncan, 1830): 285.

<sup>26</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downer's Grove: Intervarsity, 1973): 37.

<sup>27</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 308.

to readers who find themselves in extreme difficulties. The most obvious examples are those where the verb ‘to know’ (עָדָה) is translated as ‘be concerned about’, ‘care for’, or ‘protect’:

Exodus 2:23-24—‘God heard their [the Israelites’] groaning [in bondage in Egypt] ... looked on the Israelites and was concerned about (עָדָה) them’ (NIV).<sup>28</sup>

Hosea 13:5—‘I cared for (עָדָה) you in the desert, in the land of burning heat’ (NIV);

Nahum 1:7—‘The LORD is good, a stronghold in a day of trouble; he protects (עָדָה) those who take refuge in him’ (NRSV).

Other texts make the comfort-affording function of being known by God clear with other elements in the context. 2 Timothy 2:19 introduces a quotation of Numbers 16:5 with a solemn pronouncement making explicit the consolatory effect of being known by God:

‘God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: “The Lord knows those who are his.”’

And in Exodus 33:12 God reassures Moses in two complementary ways: ‘I know you by name and you have found favour with me’ (NIV).

The use of being known by God to supply comfort in two examples from the Dead Sea Scrolls further confirms its suitability to this purpose. 1QH xvii, which we looked at earlier in connection with being known by God as his child, uses the notion to explain why the author is confident of God’s help:

‘[For you, my God, you are] my refuge, my protection, the rock of my strength, my fortress. ... For you have known me since my father’ (28-29).

4Q536 Frag. 1 col. II.13 (4Q Aramaic C) explains when it is important to be known by God: ‘in the time of the wicked he will know you forever’.

The comfort offered in being known by God in these biblical and Jewish texts ranges from God’s knowing in the sense of his specific and active care to a more general notion of consolation simply because of being known by him. In terms of the latter, it seems that being

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<sup>28</sup> None of the verbs ‘hear,’ ‘see’ or ‘know’ are used here in the neutral or functional sense. D. Winton Thomas, ‘A Note on אָלְהִים וְיִרְעָה in Exod. 11.25’, *JTS* 49 (1948): 143-44, renders them as ‘hear favourably’—‘look with kindness’—‘care for, keep in mind’.

known by God offers a stable and secure identity, not unlike that which parents hope to provide for their young children, which is cheering and comforting in and of itself. When confronted with uncertainty and hardship, being known by God in and of itself can be of genuine consolation. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, German pastor and conspirator against Adolf Hitler, exemplifies this in 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 of the poem. The opening three stanzas report how the guards view Dietrich as ‘composed, contented and sure’. Bonhoeffer’s view of himself in the next stanza is less positive and more anguished. 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>29</sup>

#### 4. Implications for Christian Thought

Having probed its meaning and felt its effects, it is worth considering where a biblical understanding of being known by God sits in relation to some major areas of theology. In a single introductory article space permits only a few suggestive comments. Broadly speaking, being known by God has implications for our understanding: (1) of Christ; (2) of ourselves; and (3) of Christian moral thought.

##### *Christology*

To investigate the theme of God’s relational knowledge of human beings under the heading, ‘Known by God,’ is slightly inaccurate. Several of the texts in question refer not to being known by God, but to being known by Christ. These include: a number from the New Testament and even the extrabiblical material (the Odes of Solomon 41:15 and Ps. Sol. 17:27). Both sets of texts, being known by God or by Christ, imply the critical and decisive nature of being known. The

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<sup>29</sup> *The Prison Poems of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A New Translation with Commentary*, by Edward Robertson (Guildford, Surrey: Eagle, 1998): 38. In German the final line consists of twelve monosyllables, which climaxes the poem in striking fashion: ‘Wer ich auch bin, Du kennst mich, Dein bin ich, O Gott!’ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Widerstand und Ergebung: Briefe und Aufzeichnungen aus der Haft* (E. Bethge [ed]; München: Christian Kaiser, 1964 [1st edn 1951]): 243.

fact that the texts concerning being known by Christ do not function differently to the texts that speak explicitly of being known by God suggests that this material is another subtle and indirect New Testament affirmation of the deity of Christ. Being known by God and Christ is essentially the same thing.

Going a step further, a passage in John's Gospel underscores that the theme of being known by God is inextricably linked not only to being known by Christ, but also to Christ knowing God and God knowing Christ. Jesus says:

‘I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father’ (John 10:14-15a).<sup>30</sup>

Evidently, the relationship of mutual knowing that believers have with Jesus is modelled on the relationship of mutual knowing of Jesus and God. In the Fourth Gospel it is the Son's work to make the Father known, as the climax of the prologue makes clear: ‘No one has ever seen [or known] God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known’ (1:18). An extension of Jesus' role as mediator between God and humankind (cf. 1:51) may thus be proposed: Just as our reconciliation to God and adoption by God is ‘through Jesus Christ’ (Eph. 1:5), so also God's Son makes possible the blessing of our being known by God.

1 Peter 1 is also instructive. Just as believers are foreknown by God (κατὰ πρόγνωσιν θεοῦ; 1 Pet. 1:2; cf. Rom. 8:29), so too the Christ was ‘foreknown [by God] before the foundation of the world’ (προεγνωσμένου μὲν πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου; 1 Pet. 1:20).

In short, we know God, because he knows God. Likewise, we are known by God, because he is known by God. This leads to our next theological reflection.

### *Anthropology*

What does it mean to be a human being? Personal identity in a postmodern context is determined solely by one's place within a local culture and by its particular story. This leads to a confusing plethora of answers as to a person's essential identity. Little wonder the question, ‘who am I?’, is being asked so frequently today. Being known by God offers a different answer to this age-old question. I suggest that the

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Matt. 11:27: ‘No one knows the Son, except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son.’

Enlightenment dictum of ‘I think, therefore I am,’ or ‘I know, therefore I am,’ might be revised to, ‘I am known, therefore I am.’ Or to misquote Psalm 8:4, which addresses the question to God, by amending the punctuation:

*Question:* ‘What is man?’

*Answer:* ‘That you know him.’<sup>31</sup>

At least three others have similarly revised Descartes’ dictum, ‘I think, therefore I am,’ switching the passive for the active voice. Joseph Ratzinger prefers, ‘I am thought, therefore I am.’<sup>32</sup> N. T. Wright, claiming the support of the Apostle Paul, favours ‘I am loved, therefore I am.’<sup>33</sup> And Eberhard Jüngel’s theological anthropology likewise locates the essence of humanity in what lies beyond the person. In his view, being known by God is critical to epistemology: we know because we are known.<sup>34</sup>

But can more be said concerning the way in which God knows us? Why does being known by God lead to his unconditional acceptance? How can God know us and yet, given our sinfulness, not reject us? John Calvin’s view of the image of God may be helpful in characterising how God’s knowing of us can be so positive. Calvin defines the image of God as ‘God’s gracious beholding of man as his child’.<sup>35</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*<sup>36</sup> as having to do first of all and fundamentally with God’s beholding, rather than man’s. In Calvin’s own words, “God looks upon Himself, so to speak, and beholds Himself in man as in a mirror.”’<sup>37</sup>

Like being known by God, this gracious beholding, however, is restricted to the elect:

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. the Oxford sermon of Bernd Wannewetsch, ‘What is man? That you are mindful of him! Medical Aspirations in the Light of Psalm 8’ (<http://www.farmington.ac.uk/documents/papers>). The Hebrew of the phrase in question is literally, ‘that you remember him’.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (Translated by J. R. Foster; Herder and Herder, 1971): 185.

<sup>33</sup> N. T. Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives* (London: SPCK, 2006): 173.

<sup>34</sup> See J. B. Webster, *Eberhard Jüngel: An Introduction to His Theology*, (Cambridge: CUP, 1986): 56-58.

<sup>35</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Man* (London: Lutterworth, 1949): 77.

<sup>36</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Man*, 74 and chapter six *passim*.

<sup>37</sup> *Sermon on Job* 10:7f.

‘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>38</sup>

If being a child of God is a good relational definition of being known by God, being known by God may be defined theologically as his gracious knowing or regarding of us as we are in Christ. This perspective gives new meaning to Karl Barth’s plea that ‘anthropology should be based on Christology and not the reverse’.<sup>39</sup>

The analogy with the image of God may also help to clarify the sense in which being known by God defines our humanity. All humans are created in the image of God, yet in one sense only believers in Christ are being renewed in that image and are part of the one new man that is Christ. So too all humans are defined by being known in the general sense, as relational definitions of anthropology also affirm. However, it is believers in Christ that receive the fullest affirmation of their humanity in being known by God.

In anticipation of our third theological deliberation, to quote Barth again: ‘If theological ethics speaks about man, it does not have in view man as he understands himself but man as he knows that he is understood.’<sup>40</sup>

### ***Ethics***

Moving to ethics, the notion of being known, ultimately by God, may have something to contribute to modern debates about the status of a person in various conditions. If being human means having the capacity to know, then the embryo, the severely mentally-disabled and the person in a persistent vegetative state, for example, fail the test. Gilbert Meilaender is typical of a growing number of Christian ethicists who lament the modern tendency to define personhood in terms of consciousness and self-awareness.<sup>41</sup> If being human is fundamentally to be known, a case for the human status of the aforementioned may be more readily mounted.

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<sup>38</sup> *Sermon on Job 10:7f.*

<sup>39</sup> Karl Barth, CD III:2 (tr. H. Knight et al; Edinburgh, 1960): 46.

<sup>40</sup> K. Barth, *Ethics* (edited by D. Braun; translated by G. Bromiley; Edinburgh, 1981): 461. Cited in Michael Banner, *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* (CUP, 1999): 47.

<sup>41</sup> Gilbert Meilaender, *Bioethics: A Primer for Christians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005): 5.

To illustrate, I have two friends whose twelve-year old son is profoundly disabled. The boy is deaf and blind and, to put it bluntly, by Descartes' standard we can only make a marginal case for his status as a person. To those who have met him, however, it is obvious that his being depends not on what he knows, but rather on the fact that he is known by his parents. Their loving interaction with him, attending to his needs and drawing out his responses, give him a secure and meaningful identity.

To cite a further example, the need to be known was set in sharp relief in the early twentieth century in a different context. In the First World War Britain was faced with the dilemma of how to mark the remains of soldiers whose identity had been lost. At the suggestion of Rudyard Kipling, who was a member of the Imperial War Graves Commission, every grave of an unidentified British Empire soldier was marked with the words, 'Known unto God'.<sup>42</sup> This poignant inscription gave the person buried therein a significance and identity they would otherwise have been denied.

If Kipling and company meant that the soldier in the grave was known by God, in the full relational sense found in the Bible, the inscription may be deemed somewhat romantic. As we have seen, in the Bible God knows only the elect in this sense, his children by adoption through Jesus Christ. On the other hand, just as election properly understood does not nullify the free offer of the gospel to all of the lost without distinction, so too perhaps we may generously give the benefit of the doubt to those who have fallen in war whose identities have been lost: they are known by God. The same logic could be applied to the embryo, who, it might be argued, is only known by God. The gospel is a message of hope for all, that they might be known and loved by God and thus given a value and identity that cannot be taken away.

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<sup>42</sup> Officially adopted in World War One, this practice was also used in subsequent conflicts. I wish to thank Dr Colin Bale for help in securing this information. Similarly, one of the four texts around the tomb of the unknown soldier at Westminster Cathedral is 'unknown, yet known' (2 Cor. 6:9).

## 5. Conclusion

Contemporary interest in the subject of personal identity, as we move from a modern to a postmodern mindset, shows no sign of abating. We live in a world where ‘we are all strangers, even to ourselves’.<sup>43</sup> What does the Christian faith have to say to this dilemma?

Two of the more poignant and perplexed expressions of our theme, one biblical, from King David, the other contemporary, from Pastor Dietrich, both asked the same fundamental question: ‘who am I?’ Both arrived at the same simple but profound answer: ‘I am known by God as his child.’

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<sup>43</sup> Pamela Stephenson, *Billy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002): 1.