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READING KARL BARTH'S TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY OF FREEDOM IN THE
SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF CHIN CHRISTIANITY

by

TAWK LIAN

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2023

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LUTHER SEMINARY
ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA
PH.D. THESIS

Title of Thesis: Reading Karl Barth's Trinitarian Theology of Freedom in the Sociopolitical Context of Chin Christianity

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ABSTRACT

Reading Karl Barth's Trinitarian Theology of Freedom in the Sociopolitical Context of Chin Christianity

by

Tawk Lian

This thesis argues that the act of reading Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom in the Chin context helps the Chin to acquire a new understanding of the Trinity, which reminds them of how the triune God stands in solidarity with them in their hard situation and how the triune God gives them freedom, which empowers them to engage their sociopolitical environment in a positive way. The sense of this Trinitarian logic requests the Chin evangelical and ecumenical Christians to appropriate the implications of Barth's Trinitarian theology for reshaping their Trinitarian misperceptions underlined by the tendency to perceive the Trinity in a detached and individualistic way. Their interaction with Barth's view leads them to notice that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit always work in the shared divine mission of recreating, redeeming, and transforming humanity in its existential world. The picture of how the triune God embraces humanity and gives the gift of freedom to the latter basically reflects the indivisible, harmonious, and interdependent work of the triune God. This Trinitarian imagination will stand as a constructive inspiration for Chin theologians and pastors to improve their "pastoral" engagement with the suffering Chin, and also to reclaim the "political" role of Chin Christianity in response to the realities of their sociopolitical context. The function of this Trinitarian principle primarily deals with how the belief of God's solidarity with humanity inspires the life of the dehumanized Chin and how their encounter with God in this setting transforms and shapes them to live freely for God and for the good of others.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The loving God has brought me here to pursue the program of Doctor of Philosophy in Systematic Theology at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, USA. He has been always good, gracious, and faithful to me all the times. I will praise the name of the Lord, and devote my life to him, forever. Thanks be to God!

I am indebted to Luther Seminary for shaping me in amazing ways. The theological discernment, the friendly care, and the spiritual growth I have received here will always remind me of the love of God and inspire me to become a better human being for others. I feel most honored to declare that Dr. Amy Marga is my faculty advisor. Her love, kindness, and patience has brought me into the completion of my program. I am grateful to Dr. Lois Malcolm for offering to read my thesis and for the marvelous insights I have gained from her. I am humbled to say that Dr. Salai Pum Za Mang from Myanmar Institute of Theology is my contextual advisor. I am blessed to have him as my dear teacher, friend, and brother. I express my heart-felt thanks to Dr. Guillermo Hansen and Jennifer Mullenix from Advanced Theological Education, and to Marie Hayes (Retired) and Chenar Howard from International Student and Scholar Affairs, for their special love, care, and support. I also thank Dr. David Tiede, Luther Seminary President and Professor Emeritus, for giving me a full sponsorship. I do not have enough words to thank Peter Watters and Peter Susag from the Library. I acknowledge all gracious people from Luther community whom I cannot name here.

I convey my deep gratitude to Dr. Bruce McCormack, my former advisor at Princeton Theology Seminary, for his crucial role in writing generous recommendations for me. I feel honored to mention Dr. Timothy C. Geoffrion, who always stands with me as a compassionate teacher, companion, and mentor. I thank Faith, Hope, and Love Foundation (FHLF) for offering financial support for this program. I am also obliged to say “thank you” to my school, Chin Christian University, Hakha, for kindly allowing me to pursue my PhD degree here. I thank all loving relatives and friends for their prayers and for moral encouragement. I am thankful to my uncle, Pu Richard Zatu, and his family for their remarkable help during my contextual period.

My PhD study at Luther Seminary might not have been successful, if it was not for my parents-in-law, namely Pu Tawng Win and Pi Sui Hniang and all their children for supporting and taking care of our family while I am away from home. My mother Pi Siang Chin deserves my deepest respect, appreciation, and love for her untiring prayers. I want to thank all my siblings for standing with me in prayer and other means. I should acknowledge my sister, Hoi Can, and her husband, Hoi Ceu, for their ceaseless help.

I do not have sufficient words to thank my beloved wife Pi Biak Cin Par. My PhD study at Luther Seminary might not have happened, if it was not for her faith, courage, and commitment. I am always proud of my beloved children, Laura Dawttin Par, Moses Thangcin Lian, and Katherine Mangbawi Hnem. I see myself as a blessed man. To God be the glory!

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFPFL	Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League
BSPP	Burma Socialist Programme Party
CACC	Chin Association for Christian Communication
CBC	Chin Baptist Convention
CCOC	Chin for Christ in One Century
CDF	Chin Defense Forces
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
CHBA	Chin Hills Baptist Association
CMC	Centenary Mission for Christ
CNA	Chin National Army
CNF	Chin National Force
EAO	Ethnic Arms Organizations
NCA	Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement
NLD	National League for Democracy
NUG	National Unity Government
PDF	People Defense Forces
SLORC	State Law and Order Restoration Council
SPDC	State Peace and Development Council
UNDP	United Nation Development Program
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In this section, we will explain why the prospect of this research appears to be an interesting project for us, what it intends to achieve, and how it will be implemented.

Statement of the Problem

Known as an ethnic minority people living in the northwestern Myanmar, the Chin have ceaselessly gone through oppression and suppression in their sociopolitical life till today. The Chin happened to live under the rule of the British colonizers from 1890s to 1948. They opposed and fought against the British administration, because they wanted to live in freedom and independently from outside political interferences. As they longed for political freedom, self-determination, and democracy, the Chin leaders joined the Burman and other ethnic peoples in gaining independence and forming the new union of Burma in 1948. Leaders of ethnic minorities, including the Chin, were told that they would enjoy equal political, economic, and cultural rights within the new Union.¹ Those promises offered to the ethnic leaders, however, have never been respected and kept by subsequent Burman leaders, who have sworn to maintain the policy of Burmanizing ethnic peoples at all costs. Instead, they have been forced to assimilate into Burmese nationality and to convert to Buddhism, thereby going through endless cycle of oppression, suppression, and persecution, which meet them with untold suffering. The

¹ Lian H. Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity: A Study in Religion, Politics and Ethnic Identity in Burma* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2003), 215.

sociopolitical status and fate of the ethnic Chin and other people in Myanmar turned worse when General Ne Win staged the coup in 1962, which strengthened the politics of Burmese nationalism through harsh military means. The rule of the military regime had been notoriously justified and exploited to further the interest of hegemonic Burmese nationalist politics, when the second military coup was carried out in 1988, which killed thousands of demonstrators. The view of how Burmese nationalism had dominated politics was once again witnessed, when the third coup was staged on Feb. 1, 2021. The political future of the Chin and all others in Myanmar is now unpredictable.

It is interesting to observe how Christianity plays its role in the sociopolitical history and experience of the Chin. Christianity transforms their primitive society and provides the Chin with a new national self-awareness, worldview, and value system.² American Baptist missionaries introduced and proclaimed the Gospel to the Chin in a holistic way. This means that their presentation of the Christian Gospel was never restricted to evangelism and church planting alone, but visibly targeted social services like education, healthcare, agriculture, and others. Christianity, therefore, comes to be seen as a transforming force in the spiritual, social, and cultural life of the Chin. The role of Christianity in the Chin society became more critical after the missionary period. In general, Christianity has been seen as the means by which the Chin managed to protect their ethnic identity from the trap of Burmanization politics. Christianity prepares and offers them the source of power for coping with the sociopolitical challenges confronting them as they struggle under the rule of Burmese military regime.³ Following the work of

² Sakhong, 244.

³ Pum Za Mang, "Christianity and Ethnic Identity in Burma," *Journal of Church and State* 61, no. 1 (2019): 102.

the American Baptist missionaries who focused on the ministry of the social Gospel, many Chin theologians and pastors hold that Christianity cannot be separated from the sociopolitical world. This view, however, is not the only defining principle of the theological landscape of Chin Christianity today. This idea of Christian engagement with the sociopolitical world appeared to be challenged when the evangelical movement erupted in the 1970s. From the beginning, this evangelical thinking always prioritizes the spiritual dimension of the Christian life. In this view, God is more interested in giving spiritual salvation to human beings than requiring them to live responsibly for the sociopolitical world. Emphasizing spirituality at the expense of neglecting its implication for the present life, the evangelical thinking holds that Christians are saved for their spiritual life and that they should look forward to the coming Kingdom, offering no specific direction on how Christians should live for their present sociopolitical world. Although it is able to bring about spiritual renewal in some senses, the evangelical view does not actively deal with how a Christian should engage the society. The spread of evangelical movement among the Chin receives critical responses from mainline churches, especially the Baptist, who explicitly cherish the holistic model of Christianity and support for Christian interaction with the society. Chin Christianity now accommodates two divergent theological characteristics – evangelical and ecumenical.⁴ In short, the Chin evangelicalism emphasizes Christian salvation by faith in God with but no specific discussion on how Christians would engage the society while ecumenism says that Christianity should be interpreted in light of its practical implication for the world.

⁴ David Laisum, “Naming God in Burma Today” (DMin Thesis, The University of Chicago, 1994), 77.

Their embracing of the Trinitarian misperceptions hinders the Chin from grasping how God is involved in their life, which should serve as the source for engaging the world.

How will we imagine a new theological hermeneutics for reshaping the theological landscape of Chin Christianity dominated by divergent doctrinal trends? I tend to be positive that a constructive theological breakthrough can be expected at this point, which would but come through achieving a new understanding of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is not a strange doctrinal topic in the history of Chin Christianity. Looking back to his teaching ministry at Hakha Bible School in 1949, American Baptist missionary Robert Johnson claims, “I always had trouble trying to explain the Trinity in the Chin language—that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, not three Gods.”⁵ That being said, the concept of the Trinity was at least introduced to the Chin Christians in the early time. The word “Trinity” is translated into the Chin dialect as “*Thumkomh*” which literally means “three combined together,” preserving the distinct identity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We confess the Trinity in worship. We are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy. The Trinity becomes a liturgical language used by ordained ministers in the benediction formula: “May the love of God the Father, the grace of the Son and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit abide with you always.” The Chin Christians are well accustomed to the use of the Trinitarian names in worship. British scholar Denise Ross argues that the Chin reflect a remarkable sense of Trinitarian theology in their Christian belief and practice. She writes, “It can be seen that the Chin have developed their own concept of the Trinity, receiving salvation via their relationship with Jesus, then blessing and provision from Father God, whilst interacting

⁵ Robert G. Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 2 (Valley Forge: Published by the author, 1988), 885.

daily with their beloved Holy Spirit.”⁶ She also asserts, “All persons of the Trinity are involved in helping them live their Christian life, healing and giving them blessings. This confirms that the Chin perceive that the Godhead shares equality. Thus the Chin are clearly Trinitarian in their theology.”⁷ While accepting Ross’ argument as a remarkable description of the Chin perception of the Trinity in one sense, I suspect that the Chin Christians still have a major problem regarding the view of the Trinity. In my view, they have gone too far in separating one divine person from the others at the expense of ignoring how the triune God engages humanity in a harmonious, mutual, and interdependent way. Despite Ross’ positive assessment, we can argue that their conventional view of the Trinity does not fully help them to see how they are connected to the triune God who turns to them in their life. That being said, the misconception of the Trinity among the Chin is basically underlined by the tendency to separate the work of the triune God at the cost of ignoring the unity, mutuality, and harmony in the whole event of God’s encounter with humanity. Such misperception, unfortunately, prevents them from knowing how the triune God embraces humanity or how the latter receives freedom based on its encounter with God. We need to explore how this problem emerges.

The term “person” in Chin dialect is “*mi*.”⁸ We have this in mind when we say, “*Pathian pakhat ah “mi” pathum an um,*” (there are three persons in one God). The “*mi*”

⁶ Denise Ross, “Development of Local Theology of the Chin (Zomi) of the Assemblies of God (AG) in Myanmar: A Case Study in Contextualization” (PhD Dissertation, The University of Birmingham, UK, 2019), 155.

⁷ Ross, 188.

⁸ *Mi*, when used as a noun, has two meanings. First, “*mi*” is used for identifying an individual human being. It is generally used for people, person, or human being. Second, it is used when addressing “stranger.” See Stephen Ni Kio, *Chin Dictionary* (Hakha, Chin State: CACC, 2005), 246; David Van Bik, *Chin-English Dictionary* (Yangon: printed privately, 2010), 147; Hrang Tiam, *Chin Dictionary: Chin to Chin* (Yangon: printed privately, 2011), 139.

ideology is used for describing the whole identity of an individual person—the life and action of that person. This “*mi*” imagination comes to be used as a conceptual tool for perceiving the identity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The problem, however, is that the uncritical use of this concept tempts us to place too much emphasis on the individualistic character and act of each divine person “*mi*,” creating a relational gap between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When such a Trinitarian view prevails in their perception of the Trinity, the Chin tend to hold that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have their own individual ways of dealing with humanity. This assumption then influences the Chin to separate the Son from the Father and the Holy Spirit from the Son. In using the “*mi*” ideology in identifying the Trinity in a thoughtless manner, they come to disregard the sense of how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit encounters humanity on the basis of their inseparable or indivisible unity. Worst of all, they are tempted to perceive the life and act of the triune God as being individualistic, divided or disconnected from each other. While being viewed as less connected to humanity but controlling history from above in a dominating way, God the Father is seen as waiting for being propitiated through the blood of Jesus Christ who died for the sinners. He is seen as being only concerned for the spiritual dimension of the human life. In this manner, there is no clear emphasis on how the saving work of the Son continues to be effective for us through the work of the Holy Spirit, who is instead known as taking over the Son or engaging humanity in an independent way. Portraying the “*mi*” identity of each divine person in a disconnected form, many fail to see how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as gracious God encounters, transforms, and redeems humanity. David Laisum describes the concept of God prevalent among the Chin evangelical Christians, saying,

“they maintain the idea of a God who is powerful, who gives holy gifts and prosperity if approached in a proper way (active participation in religious activities and generosity in giving, and obedience to the leaders); and who condemns sinners (non-born again Christians and non-Christians) to the eternal hell of fire.”⁹ The “*mi*” identity of God the Father is thus understood as less connected to that of the reconciling mission of the Son and the redemptive act of the Holy Spirit in Christian life. Such view does not offer true explanation on how the triune God turns to us in the Son who embodies our realities or how he stands in solidarity with us in our daily life through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the influence of the “*mi*” ideology is felt in such a way that it prevents us from discerning how the Father, the Son and the Spirit as one God encounter us in our daily struggle.

To be more specific, the figure of God the Father in the Chin evangelical thinking is largely perceived in a dominating manner. The evangelical approach has the tendency to look at the life and work of Jesus Christ from the exclusive view of spiritual salvation while paying less attention to how it relates to the sociopolitical dimension of the human life. In contrast, the ecumenical Christians emphasize the moral life and teaching of Jesus Christ. The work of the Holy Spirit in evangelical view tends to be more individualistic yet mysterious manifested only to certain Christians while its image in the ecumenical thinking focuses on the intellectual and moral dimension of the human life. Both are in need of acquiring a new understanding of how the Holy Spirit enlightens, transforms, and guides the life of Christians towards understanding the Father and the Son at a deeper level. As already said, the failure to see how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit work together in the picture of the “divine-human encounter” prevents us from knowing how we are connected to the triune God who graciously gives us inner freedom for living as

⁹ Laisum, “Naming God in Burma Today,” 89.

engaged Christians in the world. When this Trinitarian thread is absent in the preaching of the church, people cannot imagine the triune God in their life or feel how their faith in God transforms them to live a productive life. Thus, their Trinitarian misperception leads the Chin to ignore the connection between what it means for them to live in relationship with God and how that experience empowers them to live responsibly for the society.

The Significance of Karl Barth

Our interaction with the basic Trinitarian problem pervading Chin Christianity today requires us to turn to Karl Barth for learning how he develops his doctrine of the Trinity. Our optimism for treating Barth as a relevant figure at this point needs to be supported with a thoughtful explanation, however. Barth is still broadly viewed as an exclusive theologian, who is less to do with the pluralistic contexts like Myanmar. The prospect of his practical relevance to such context continues to be scrutinized based on his controversial remark, which says, “Other religions are just unbelief.”¹⁰ Myanmar is a majority Buddhist country with more than 85 % of its population being constituted by practicing Buddhists.¹¹ David Thang Moe is well aware of the puzzle on how Barth with his completely different European context can be seen as a relevant example for the Burmese context as a whole. According to Moe, “The situation in life that confronted Barth was a world away from that of ethnic minorities wrestling with matters of identity and rights under a military regime where the overwhelming majority are Buddhists.”¹²

¹⁰ D. T. Niles, “Karl Barth—Personal Memory,” *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 11 (Autumn 1969): 11.

¹¹ Thant Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma* (London: Atlantic Books, 2019), 24.

¹² David Thang Moe, “Reading Karl Barth in Myanmar: The Significance of His Political Theology for a Public Theology in Myanmar,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 12 (2018): 417.

Truthfully speaking, Barth never lived in the world inhabited by people in Myanmar, where Christians see themselves being exposed to the religious, cultural, and sociopolitical spheres dominated by majority Burmese Buddhists. He grew up, lived, and worked in a particular European context mostly characterized by Christian culture, thinking, and values. The difference between these two contexts is striking. But what makes them similar to each other is that both have their own sociopolitical problems, which profoundly disrupt the wellbeing of humanity. Barth was deeply unsettled when he saw the life of humanity being disrupted and dehumanized by capitalism, racism, and authoritarianism. According to Christiane Tietz, “Karl Barth allowed himself to be moved by the realities that surrounded him. It was the harsh and perplexing of the world that led him to ask about God in a new way.”¹³ In calling Barth “a contextual theologian,” Timothy Gorringer rightly claims that the need to respond day to day social and political reality must be considered as methodological significance for Barth.¹⁴ When he wrote a letter to Asian theologians in sharing perspectives on doing theology in their Asian context, Barth stated that they should do theology with all the openness for the problems burning in their regions and for their fellow human beings while moving forward in freedom, which is given and allowed to them by the Spirit of the Lord (II Cor. 3:17).¹⁵ It is true to say that Barth was much less informed about the Burmese Chin context. But his relevance for us is determined by his remarkable example of placing himself in the real

¹³ Christiane Tietz, “Karl Barth’s Historical and Theological Significance,” *The Willey Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, Vol.I, edited by George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson (Hoboken, NJ: John Willey & Sons, Inc., 2020), 9.

¹⁴ Timothy J. Gorringer, *Karl Barth against Hegemony: Christian Theology in Context* (Oxford: University Press, 1999), 71-72.

¹⁵ Karl Barth, “No Boring Theology: A Letter from Karl Barth,” *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 11 (Autumn 1969): 5.

world as a practical theologian, dealing with contextual issues in light of his new perception of God. A native Chin theologian Edmund Za Bik remarks that a relevant Christian theology for our context is one that is both committed to God and solidarity with the victims of injustices and suffering, preparing us to participate in the struggle for human wholeness, freedom, and dignity.¹⁶ Clearly, the search for such a theological hermeneutics appeals us to look to Barth, who basically deals with how our faith in God transforms and empowers us to tackle our contextual realities as active Christians.

As we go to the next step, we come to inquire into how Barth's understanding of God appears to be interesting for us. How does he conceive of God? Barth's doctrine of God is basically characterized by the view that God is wholly transcendent, sovereign, and mysterious. In analyzing Barth's doctrine of God, Katherine Sonderegger writes, "God hurtles through the barriers erected by a creature bent on knowing only the world and worldly desires, and bends that creaturely mind and heart to the divine Presence, a LORD alarmingly, vividly near. . . . God is mystery just because he is present. God stands before the creature as Lord."¹⁷ The transcendent and sovereign God is the God who chooses to be present with humanity in time. Barth's idea of God's sovereignty, George Hunsinger explains, "is not restricted to the realm of inward experience, nor to that of 'historical consciousness,' nor even to that of interpersonal relationships, but rather encompasses the concreteness of the world in all its dimensions, including both nature and politics."¹⁸ His perception of God appears to be more distinctive when it puts

¹⁶ Edmund Za Bik, "Liberation Now," *WAYS MIT Journal of Theology* 2 (2001): 5.

¹⁷ Katherine Sonderegger, "God," *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, edited by Paul Dafydd Jones and Paul T. Nimmo (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 215-16.

¹⁸ George Hunsinger, *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 188.

emphasis on the freedom of God. For Barth, freedom is what constitutes not only God's action towards what is outside of himself but also God's inner being. God is the God who loves in freedom. The triune God known to us in the biblical revelation is the God who relates to and sets up fellowship with what is outside of him (the world) in freedom. The free God enters into communion with the world, manifesting himself in his activity as Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer.¹⁹ The significance of Barth's theology for the Chin is, therefore, conditioned by its ability to maintain the unity of the life and act of the triune God while simultaneously presenting freedom in the triune God as that which constitutes God's action towards humanity. Barth successfully sets a new ground where we see that, when the triune God turns to humanity in freedom, God allows the latter to acquire freedom as a gift from him. Barth says, "Human freedom never ceases to be the event wherein the free God gives and man receives this gift. God freely makes Himself available to man by granting him the freedom he is meant to have."²⁰ For Barth, the triune God uses his freedom to become God for us, which is given to humanity as a gift based on its relationship with the triune God. His understanding of the free God is what shapes his practical engagement with his sociopolitical world. He is always aware that the effectiveness of theology for public life has been preceded by its connection with the Gospel, in which we see how the triune God encounters humanity in its existential world. Such a liberating knowledge of the Trinity, however, has not yet been realized in the theological landscape of Chin Christianity, which is still far from the view of how the triune God enters into history as the free God for being in solidarity with humanity.

¹⁹ *CD* II/1-28, 303.

²⁰ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), 75.

Keeping in mind that the Chin need a new Trinitarian perspective, we will study Barth's doctrine of the Trinity, which will lead us to acquire a new understanding of how the triune God reveals to us in freedom and stands in solidarity with us. This task will help us to recognize how Barth's view intersects the Trinitarian perspectives of the evangelical and ecumenical groups. In telling us how freedom is given to us as a gift based on our connection with the triune God, Barth's position appeals us to exercise our God-given freedom for the good of our fellow human beings. This research will lead us to see that we acquire our inner freedom when we are set to live in relationship with the triune God, which will in turn shape our interaction with the society. Being viewed as evangelical in nature, Barth's life as a pastor and theologian testifies what it means for one to live and act as an engaged Christian in the society. Barth's example offers us the model of how evangelicalism turns its face toward the sociopolitical realities as well as how Christian public life has been shaped by its redemptive connection with the triune God. This study will, therefore, explain that Christianity is concerned for the liberating mission of humanity in the public world, reflecting the freedom of the triune God who encounters and empowers humanity to live positively in the sociopolitical world. This research will lead us to achieve a new Trinitarian theology of freedom in Chin Christianity, which teaches us how we are connected to the triune God and how that experience transforms and shapes us to live freely and positively for other peoples.

The Structure of the Research

This research is intended for arguing how Barth's life and thought intersect the theological shape of Chin Christianity on how Christians would attain a new perception of the triune God and how they would interact with their sociopolitical world based on

their relationship with the triune God. In chapter 2, we describe the sociopolitical history and experience of the Chin. The Chin once lived as independent people in their land. They had their own ruling system for dealing with their internal affairs. However, the sociopolitical life of the Chin turned to a different path when they were occupied and ruled by the British colonizers. The Chin got independence from the British in cooperation with other ethnic peoples and joined the new Union of Burma based on the promise that they would enjoy equal sociopolitical rights and freedom. But they are never given the chance to enjoy those promises. Instead, they have been forced to assimilate into Burmese nationality, thereby facing oppression, repression, and persecution at the hands of Burmese military regime. In giving the picture of how the Chin have sacrificed and suffered for the cause of preserving their religious and political identity in the face of Burmese military regime, this chapter reminds us that the contextual reality shaping the life of the Chin today should be seen as the focus of our theological reflection.

As we move to chapter 3, we will see that it was Christianity that transformed the life of the Chin, brought about a new civilization to them, and helped them to live as distinct ethnic peoples throughout their sociopolitical experience under repressive Burmese nationalistic politics. In so doing, this section explores the life and works of all American Baptist missionaries to the Chin for remembering how they were committed to the ministry of the Gospel, which was carried out in a way that addressed the whole aspects of the life of the Chin people. Their example of proclaiming and engaging the Gospel in a holistic manner influences local Chin pastors and church leaders to hold that the ministry of the church should always intend to bring about transformation in the spiritual, physical, and social life of the Chin. Such motive and practice have effectively

defined Chin Christianity throughout its painful struggle under the shadow of hegemonic Burmese nationalist politics. However, this view appeared to be contested when evangelicalism was set to penetrate into the theological landscape of Chin Christianity. Seeing this factor as a critical theological issue, this chapter hints that a new Trinitarian imagination needs to emerge in Chin Christianity, for, as it will be elaborated, doctrinal divergences among the Chin at this point have been underlined by the failure to have the transformative understanding of the life and act of the triune God. In this way, it argues that the transformative power of Christianity will be better sensed in the life of the Chin when evangelical and ecumenical groups come to rethink their perception of the Trinity.

The study of the life and work of Karl Barth will occupy chapter 4, covering information on how he was brought up in his theological environment, how he served his pastoral ministry, and how he came to break with modern liberal theology in response to rising contextual issues pervading his sociopolitical world. When he lived in Germany where he taught at universities, Barth did not limit his theological work within academic setting. He was actively involved in the church struggle, dealing with the dehumanizing German Nazi rule at all costs. His perception of God stood at the forefront in all his steps. He spearheaded the church struggle from Switzerland by getting involved in the world ecumenical movement, calling for Christian leaders to render greater political action and to inspire greater Christian service for the world. The image of Christianity as seen in the life and work of Barth in this respect is one setting its foot in the sociopolitical world.

In chapter 5, we explore how Barth develops his doctrine of the Trinity, which attempts to explain how the triune God exercises his freedom for encountering humanity in history. For grasping a better understanding of how Barth speaks of the function of

divine freedom in his Trinitarian theology, this chapter highlights an analytical overview of how debates on Barth's Trinitarian theology have been initiated and exchanged between some prominent Barth scholars, namely Bruce Cormack, Paul Molnar, and George Hunsinger. Realizing that the debate at this point is more or less concerned with how Barth talks about the idea of divine freedom in his Trinitarian theology, this chapter analyzes his doctrine of the Trinity, identifying how he speaks of God the Father as the eternal God who turns to us in the Son, describes the Son as the disclosure of God's full identification with humanity, and mentions the Holy Spirit as God who is at work in human life, creating relation between God and human. In this process, Barth presents the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as sharing the same divine mission, whose life and act as revealed into human history are indivisible and mutual. A fuller understanding of his Trinitarian view is thus discerned when he portrays the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as engaging in the shared divine mission for encountering humanity in freedom and bringing it into relationship with God, whereby humanity receives freedom. Humanity is enabled to exercise its freedom for God and others as it lives in relationship with God.

In chapter 6, we describe how Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom intersects the Chin evangelical and ecumenical churches in their respective places. In highlighting how evangelical and ecumenical trends have characterized the theological landscape of Chin Christianity in more detail—positively and negatively, this chapter argues that their interaction with Barth's view helps the Chin to reshape their Trinitarian misperceptions, which tend to ignore the indivisible unity of the life and act of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In contending that the significance of Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom for Chin Christianity is underlined by its commitment to keeping the view of the

indivisibleness and interrelatedness of the work of the triune God discerned in God's encounter with humanity, which enables us to better imagine how the triune God relates to us in our struggle as well as how he gives us freedom based on our relationship with him, this chapter argues that the implication of Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom for Chin Christianity can be observed in two ways—pastoral and political. In calling for both evangelical and ecumenical groups to improve their perception of the Trinity in light of Barth's view, this chapter states that the new Trinitarian hermeneutics appeals them to reconsider their pastoral interaction with the dehumanized Chin while asking them to see that they are called to positively engage the sociopolitical world, thereby living into their new freedom in the world, which is given to them based on their connection with God.

In short, this work tries to explain that the shape of Chin Christianity should never be imagined apart from its role in the sociopolitical world. From the beginning, Chin Christianity has been known as that which concerns not only the spiritual matter but also the social, economic, and cultural areas in the life of human. This fact has been testified by the constructive role this Christianity has vitally played in the life of the Chin who have struggled under Burmese military rule for decades. This view, however, has been widely contested since the emergence of Chin evangelicalism, which emphasizes spirituality at the expense of ignoring Christian role in the society. The prevalence of theological divergences between evangelical and ecumenical groups has come to prevent Chin Christianity from producing a transformative impact in the sociopolitical life of the Chin today. The main problem with both camps is that they are deeply entangled with striking Trinitarian misconceptions, causing them to lose sight of the relation between Christian faith and life in the real world. Barth serves as a helpful companion here, for his

Trinitarian theology of freedom gives us a new understanding of the life and work of the triune God in a way that clarifies how the triune God encounters and stands in solidarity with us in our sociopolitical struggle, and how he gives us freedom as a gift, which empowers us to live freely for God and other fellow human beings. Their interaction with his Trinitarian theology of freedom requires both the Chin evangelical and ecumenical theologians and pastors to redesign their pastoral engagement with the suffering Chin based on their knowledge of divine solidarity with humanity, and to enlarge their idea of Christian political role in light of their understanding of the gift of Christian freedom.

CHAPTER 2

THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE CHIN

Known as a majority Buddhist country in Southeast Asia, Myanmar has a population of about 55 million, out of which about 85 percent of the population claim to be conservative Theravada Buddhists.¹ The country is home to more than 100 ethno-linguistic groups with non-Burman communities making up at least 30 percent of the population.² Recognized as one major ethnic group in Myanmar, the Chin live in the northwestern part of the country, which they have claimed as their land since many centuries ago. Making up of about two percent in the country's population, around 90 percent of the Chin are Christians. While the term "Chin" generally refers to one of the many ethnic groups in Myanmar, the Chin are ethnically and linguistically diverse.³ The main six Chin tribes of Asho, Cho (Sho), Khumi (M'ro), Laimi, Mizo (Lushai), and Zomi (Kuki) can be identified by at least 60 different sub-tribal groups. Though there is no up-to-date census data, some statistics reveal that the Chin population in Chin State is around

¹ Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma*, 23-24.

² Ashley South and Marie Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 1 (April 2016): 130.

³ Human Rights Watch, *We Are Like Forgotten People: The Chin People of Burma: Unsafe in Burma, Unprotected in India* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009), 9.

500,000, speaking about 20 mutually distinct languages, with no common languages.⁴

The number of diaspora Chin living in other parts of the country is believed to exceed 300,000 while that of those being resettled in other countries stands around 200,000.

Most historians agree that the Chin belong to the Tibeto-Burman who originated from China. In their book *The Chin Hills* written in 1892, British Officers Carey and Tuck write,

The Chins or Kyins are a group of hill tribes, all talking various dialects of the same Tibeto-Burman speech and calling themselves by various names The Kukis of Manipur, the Lushais of Bengal and Assam, and the Chins originally lived in what we now know as Thibet and are of one and the stock; their form of government, method of cultivation, manners and customs, beliefs and traditions all point to one origin.⁵

Similarly, Tucker argues that the Tibeto-Burmans, who included the Burmans, Rakhines, Chins, and Kachins, all came from China.⁶ The time when Tibeto-Burmans entered Burma is considered to be around the ninth or tenth century.⁷ This historical fact thus affirms that the Chin originally belong to the Tibeto-Burman group and that they came down to Burma from China during the last quarter of the first millennium AD.

There are several hypotheses on the time when the Chin arrived in the present-day Chin State. In his book *The Structure of Chin Society*, Lehman remarkably notes, “Chin history begins after A.D. 750, with the development of Burman civilization and of Chin

⁴ Chin Human Rights Organization, *Threats to Our Existence: Persecution of Ethnic Chin Christians in Burma* (Chiangmai: Wanida Press, 2012), 18.

⁵ Bertram S. Carey & H. N. Tuck, *The Chin Hills: A History of the People, Our Dealings with Them, Their Customs and Manners, and a Gazetteer of Their Country* (Rangoon: Government Printing Press, 1896), 2.

⁶ Shelby Tucker, *Burma: The Curse of Independence* (London: Pluto Press, 2001), 9.

⁷ F. S. V. Donnison, *Burma* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1970), 49.

interaction with it.”⁸ At this point, Lehman speculates that the Chin quite possibly occupied their present area probably into the middle of the first millennium A.D.⁹ However, most Chin historians opt for a much later date for the arrival of the Chin to their present land. With an open disapproval to Lehman’s conjecture, Chin historian Chawn Kio says that the most probable date for the arrival of the Chin in their present land is 1450 A.D.¹⁰ A prominent Chin scholar, politician, and historian, Lian H. Sakhong also mentions, “The Chin settlement in present Chinram began only after the founding of Kalembo in 1395, and reached the furthest northern region of their settlement in present Manipur State of India in about 1554.”¹¹ Though it is hard to pick a specific historical date for the time when the Chin first established their settlement in western Burma, it is possible to claim that the Chin reached today Chin State some time around AD 1500.

Despite having a distinct national identity as a separate ethnic people in Myanmar/Burma as affirmed by their history, the Chin are always forced to believe or accept the view that they have been part of the Burman society from the beginning and that their sociopolitical future should always be decided by the Burman leaders who have been dominating them for decades. Contrary to this, many scholars within and outside Myanmar/Burma claim that the Chin had been largely independent people before they joined the Union of Burma in 1948 and that they became part of the Union of Myanmar/Burma not because they suffered defeat by the Burman but because they were

⁸ F. K. Lehman, *The Structure of Chin Society: A Tribal People of Burma Adapted to A Non-Western Civilization*, 2nd edition (Aizawl: Firma KLM (p) LTD, 1980), 22.

⁹ Lehman, 13.

¹⁰ Chawn Kio, *The History of The Origin of The Chin: Chin Political History (Chin Miphun Thawhkehnak Tuanbia: Chin Ramkhel Tuanbia)* (Yangon: Dingdi Music Magazine Committee, 2014), 71.

¹¹ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 16.

invited to join them in gaining independence from the British and to become co-founder of the independent Burma based on the condition that they would be given the right to self-determination within the new Union for executing their internal affairs in freedom. What still remains as a nightmare for the Chin and other ethnic peoples in subsequent generations, however, is that without paying attention to the sociopolitical matter of the Chin, Burman leaders have continued their policy of Burmanizing the Chin and others, generation after generation, disregarding their sociopolitical identity. For understanding the historical background of the sociopolitical life of the Chin, this chapter will attempt to explore the history of the Chin for knowing how they had been ruled by the British who strengthened the old chieftainships, why they made a political decision to join the Burman in gaining independence from the British rule, and how they struggle and suffer under the hegemonic politics of Burmese nationalism which always aims to Burmanize them by ignoring their sociopolitical aspirations and to convert them to Buddhism.

The Chin under British Rule

Before having been defeated and ruled by the British colonizers since the 1890s, the Chin lived as an independent people in their land without ever experiencing annexation or occupation from the outside power or a single authority. Chin politician Lian Uk states,

The whole territory inhabited by people under the definition of Chins had never been under a central authority of native rulers or by any power outside of their common frontiers They never had a single ruler to control the whole territory before British annexation The people in the territory which is now called Mizoram, and the northern parts of Chin state were ruled by hereditary aristocratic royal families like Sailo, Cinzah, Zathang, Zahau, Tlaisu, Zaniat, Sukte, and Kamhau etc.. In many other places especially in southern Chin Hills,

land owners or well-to-do people had ruled for generations with the support of the population in the community.¹²

This record appears to affirm that the Chin lived largely free from outside interference or influences for centuries, governing themselves under a system of the local chiefdoms.

At its original state, the vast territories where the Chin lived included not only the Chin State of modern-day Myanmar, but also neighboring regions in Bangladesh as well as India's northeastern states of Mizoram and part of Manipur. However, the foreign invasion by the British in the 19th century marked the end of a unified and free Chinland.¹³ The British colonizers, who had been ruling Burma and India for decades, invaded the Chin Hills because they had found themselves under the constant jeopardy by the sporadic attack from the Chin. Carey and Tuck explained the reason for invading the Chin land this way: "The policy of the Government from the very beginning had been one of defense of our borders and non-interference with the trans-border tribesmen; this policy had failed; no schemes and no efforts sufficed to keep the Lushais from raiding into our territory."¹⁴ Another British military officer, J.D. Macnabb, reported in 1892,

The tribes in these hills bordering on Burma are usually known as Chins, and those bordering on Bengal and Assam as Lushais. The frequent raids committed on the plain villages by these tribes called loudly for decisive action; and in 1888 matters were brought to a climax by the murder of Lieutenant Stewart by the Lushais whilst surveying.¹⁵

¹² Lian Uk, "Emergence of the Chin Hills Regulation 1896: Its Scope and Importance in History," *Chin History, Culture & Identity*, ed. K. Robin (New Delhi: Dominant Publishers and Distributors, 2009), 271.

¹³ Human Rights Watch, *We Are Like Forgotten People*, 9.

¹⁴ Carey & Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, 12.

¹⁵ A.G.E. Newland, *The Image of War, or Service on the Chin Hills* (Calcutta: Thacker Spink And Co., 1894), 2.

It is thus clear that the British's decision to invade the Chin Hills was preceded by the concern for defending their occupied territories from the spontaneous attack of the Chin as well as the desire for retaliating the Chin for the tragic killing of the British officer.

At the beginning, the British officers attempted to deal with the Chin through negotiations. When they tried to negotiate with the Chin leaders, the British asked them to recognize the British Government's appointment of Maung Pa Gyi as Governor of the Kale territory, a Burman region bordering Chinland and to stop their acts of aggressions and raids into the territories of Kale.¹⁶ When the British met with the Chin chiefs from Hakha, Falam, and Tiddim regions in 1887-88, they required those leaders to allow them to make land route for connecting British India and British Burma through their territories. However, the Chin chiefs boldly objected to the British proposal of negotiation because they did not want the British soldiers to claim authority within their own territories. The British negotiators were reported to have fired guns to scare and force the Chin rulers so that they might change their decision.¹⁷ Far from cooperating with the British, the Chin rulers made a unified determination to resist and prevent the British from occupying their country at all costs. But the British colonizers came to deal with the Chin through military means as they realized that their negotiation with the Chin rulers was no longer successful. As they launched expeditions into various parts of the Chin Hills such as Tiddim, Falam, Hakha, Thantlang and other parts of Southern Chin Hills in 1889, the British troops faced strong resistance from the Chin, who bravely stood

¹⁶ Carey & Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, 22-23.

¹⁷ Uk, "Emergence of the Chin Hills Regulation 1896," 276.

to defend and protect their land with unsophisticated weapons. Despite confronting the invading British with courageous and collective acts, the Chin were not able to protect themselves from the British who defeated the entire Chin Hills in early 1895.¹⁸ In this way, the British government began to rule the whole Chin Hills with their Chin Hills Regulation since 1896. This regulation, Lian Uk says, was the first modern political constitution ever applied in the whole Chin territory, adding “It was because of the Chin Hills Regulation that the name Chin is recognized internationally.”¹⁹ The Chin scholar further notes, “The Chin Hills Regulation 1896 will remain in many libraries and archives as a strong evidence of this people being recognized once as a distinct people living in the territory of a definite boundary.”²⁰ The Chin Hills Regulation turned out to be the main legal and political tool by which the British ruled the Chin for more than 50 years.

As ratified in this Chin Hills Regulation, the Chin Hills was governed by the British Superintendent, who was but subject to the control of the Chief Commissioner of Burma. In principle, the local chiefs ruled the Chin communities on behalf of the British Superintendent. Meanwhile, the Regulation allowed the Superintendent to impose fines on the villagers, to prohibit the formation of new villages or the destruction of old villages, to exercise a power the Chin regarded as the principal power of the tribal chief, and to deport and detain villagers, and confiscate their properties.²¹ Authorized by the Superintendent, the native Chin chiefs administered “their respective domains as they

¹⁸ Carey & Tuck, *The Chin Hills*, 114-15.

¹⁹ Uk, “Emergence of the Chin Hills Regulation 1896,” 268.

²⁰ Uk, 280.

²¹ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 103.

were before British annexation, and in return, the Chin native rulers were to give tributes to the British in recognition of the latter superiority over the former.”²² The British rule in the Chin Hills was therefore known as the indirect rule of the British government because the Regulation allowed the local chiefs to rule their communities on behalf of the British officials. That being the case, the main responsibility of the chiefs was “to maintain law and order within their jurisdictions and to collect taxes on behalf of the British authority, though they enjoyed certain privileges like feudal lords of the *Ram-Uk* (chiefs).”²³

Since the very early years, many Chin were deeply angered by the British rule because, as Sakhong writes, “in contrast to the Chin tradition, the British imposed taxes based on individuals, not on households, which was traditionally unacceptable for the Chin.”²⁴ When all the chiefs in Chinland protested the new tax system unfairly imposed upon their local people, which turned out to be a heavy burden especially for widows and elderly persons, the British officials decided to reinstate the traditional system of taxation in 1908.²⁵ Another serious issue troubling the Chin was that, as Chawn Kio writes, the British had a tendency to give a lower pay to their employed Chin compared to other ethnics who were serving for the British. When the British officers required the Chin to serve as Force Labor in the British war against Germans during World War I, many Chin living in today Hakha area saw it as a practice of discrimination against them and staged

²² Uk, “Emergence of the Chin Hills Regulation 1896,” 261.

²³ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 104.

²⁴ Sakhong, 104.

²⁵ Sakhong, 104.

a war against the British, lasting from 1917 to 1923.²⁶ Despite unleashing their utmost strength the Chin could not claim victory in their fight against the British due to poor technologies and insufficient weapons. Seeing that they needed to better cooperate with the Chin in order to rule them more peacefully, the British officers amended the Chin Hills Regulation in 1919, which included the amendment of tax policy and the adoption of the Chin language as the medium of instruction in schools all over Chinland.²⁷

Even as they were experiencing remarkable constructive steps implemented by the British in terms of administration, the ordinary Chin were not but fully pleased with the British rule as it became more oppressive and unbearable to them. As times went by, the rule of the British-appointed Chin local chiefs and headmen turned to be more and more exploitative in their interaction with ordinary people in that they had a tendency to collect heavy taxes from them. This happened because the Chin Hills Regulation ruled that appointed chiefs would not receive payment from the British government, but would benefit from the tax paid by ordinary Chin who lived under their chieftainships. The imposed tax system required local people to give food, meat, and firewood to their chiefs who could also ask them to serve as their porters without paying charges. Opposing the oppressive rule of chiefs (*ram-uk bawi*) allowed by the Regulation, the Chin held a Chin national conference in Falam, the then capital of Chin State on February 20, 1948, during which 5000 attendees voted against the chieftain system with only 17 voting in favor of

²⁶ Kio, *The History of The Origin of The Chin*, 309-16.

²⁷ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 154.

it.²⁸ The Chin observe this historic day as Chin National Day for remembering that the Chin were officially freed on this day from enslaving duties rendered to the ruling chiefs.

While being broadly viewed as unjust and oppressive in many aspects, the presence of the British government in Chin Hills is, on the other hand, acknowledged for its significant role in the advancement of modern civilization, governing system, and education among the Chin. Carefully observed, the British rule is seen as a historical source of national awakening for the Chin, as it effectively introduced them to Western education, technological modernization and the wider modern world far beyond the boundary of their small country.²⁹ The British rule is also acknowledged for its important role in paving the way for the coming of Christianity to Chin State. While administrating the Chin Hills as Superintendent, the British officer Captain Dury helped the American Baptist missionaries Arthur and Laura Carson as they considered coming to the Chin Hills. Leaving behind Thayetmyo in Burman territory, where they served among the plain Chins, as detailed discussion will be offered in chapter 3, the Carsons headed to Hakha, which had become the controlled territory and base of the British administration. They arrived in Hakha on 15 March 1899, being escorted by the British Indian army sent for their protection by Captain Dury, who not only invited them but also arranged their journey.³⁰ This historical fact reaffirms that the British played an important role in the emergence and development of Christianity in Chin State. Realizing that the Hakha

²⁸ Kio, *The History of the Origin of the Chin*, 361-62.

²⁹ Pum Za Mang, "The Politics of Religious Conversion among the Ethnic Chin in Burma," *Studies in World Christianity* 24, no. 3 (2018): 194.

³⁰ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 124.

mission school run by Laura H. Carson was essential for the Chin people, the Commissioner of the British government assured her that she had the right to appoint teachers and carry out educational efforts, which should be but approved and confirmed by the government officials.³¹ Its support for the educational progress of the Chin reveals that the British government played a big role in the uplift of the social life of the Chin.

The British had ruled the Chin with its Chin Hills Regulation until 1948, when the Chin and other ethnic minority peoples officially joined the Union of Burma in gaining independence from the British with the hope for achieving a better political life. Even as the British rule hugely modernized the Chin, helped them to come to a high stage of civilization and education, and brought them into contact with Christianity, which indeed stands as the source of their social transformation, the Chin always had an endless desire to acquire a complete liberation from the British rule, which tended to focus on serving its own interests at the expense of suppressing or limiting the right of the ordinary Chin.

The Joining of the Union of Burma

With the rise of Clement Attlee's Labour Party in 1945, there occurred a significant change in the policy of the British government toward its colonized countries, including Burma.³² The government of the Labor Party, Sakhong writes, "had already prepared to grant Burma independence either within or without the Commonwealth."³³ Upon realizing that it appeared to be less capable of administrating its colonies with its

³¹ Robert G. Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 1 (Valley Forge: published by the author, 1988), 438-39.

³² Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 201.

³³ Sakhong, 205.

own political strategy after the Second World War, the government of Prime Minister Attlee hastened the plan of giving independence to India and Burma.³⁴ As part of implementing this goal, Prime Minister Attlee invited Aung San, the then Chief Minister of the Interim Burmese Government in December 1946 for talks in London on the matter of Burma's future. The Burman leader was accompanied by some members of the Executive Council of Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) and of the major parties.³⁵ After having had a thorough discussion on the future of the independent Burma, Attlee and Aung San signed the formal treaty of independence on January 27, 1947, paving the way for Burma's independence in the following year.³⁶ The agreements signed by Attlee and Aung San, also known as the San-Atlee Agreement, demand that "a delegation from the British parliament and a delegation from the Burmese cabinet would meet representatives of Chins, Kachins, Shans, and Karennis in a conference to discuss the future of the frontier areas."³⁷ According to Sakhong, Aung San and his delegation did not represent nor have the right to discuss the future of the peoples from the Chin, Kachin, and Shan territory, for they were independent peoples before colonial period, who were separately conquered by the British as independent countries.³⁸ In this regard, Aung San assured PM Attlee that he would be able to persuade ethnic peoples and secure

³⁴ Sakhong, 206.

³⁵ Maung Maung, *A Trial in Burma: The Assassination of Aung San* (Yangon: Unity Publishing House, 2012), 12.

³⁶ Maung Htin Aung, *A History of Burma* (London: Comlumbia University Press, 1967), 306.

³⁷ Aung, 306.

³⁸ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 209.

their trust by guaranteeing them that they would have the right to regain independence from the Union of Burma and acquire the freedom to build their political future.³⁹

The historic Conference took place in Panglong, Shan State on February 7, 1947, attended by Aung San, leader of the AFPFL Party, and leaders of the Chin, Kachin, and Shan ethnic groups. At that time, ethnic leaders unanimously claimed that, if they would consider gaining independence together with the Burman and joining the independent Burma afterwards, they would do so only on the condition that they would be allowed to maintain their pre-colonial independent status within the independent Burma.

Representatives of the Chin who attended the Panglong Conference were Chief Hlur Hmung of Lungbang (Falam), Chief Kio Mang of Hakha, and Chief Thawng Za Khup of Seizang (Tiddim), who was accompanied by his interpreter Vum Kho Hau.⁴⁰ The Chin representatives were reported to have been disappointed by the unexpected absence of H.N.C. Stevenson, a British Director of the Frontier Areas, who was fully committed to the vision of creating a colonial province known as the United Frontier Union, and who was deeply concerned for the political future of non-Burman nationalities.⁴¹ Stevenson always insisted that both the British administration and the Burmese AFPFL should seriously consider the issue of the ethnic minorities and the idea of their independence. Delegates of the minority groups favored his proposal while the AFPFL members

³⁹ Sakhong.

⁴⁰ Sakhong, 212.

⁴¹ Sakhong, 207-12.

strongly opposed to it.⁴² When the first Panglong Conference was held in March 1946 through the leadership of Stevenson, the attending ethnic leaders were inspired by his willingness to construct a separate political status for ethnic nationalities including the Chin.⁴³ The absence of Stevenson at the second Panglong Conference, as mentioned above, came as a real disappointment to the Chin delegates, because he was the one whom they trusted, who spoke their languages, and who was expected to serve as their translator during the negotiation with the Burmans.⁴⁴ In relation to why he did not attend the Panglong Conference, Sakhong writes that Stevenson's proposal on the political status of the non-Burman nationalities in his legal framework of a United Frontier Union was no longer accepted by the Labour Government in London, which opted for a different plan on Burma's independence as agreed by Mr. Attlee and Aung San, finally resulting in the act of forcing Stevenson himself to resign from his job as Director of the Frontier Areas.⁴⁵ The British government now opted for "the unification of the Frontier Areas and Ministerial Burma with the free consent of the inhabitants of those areas."⁴⁶

Aung San was able to earn the trust and approval of representatives of the non-Burman nationalities at the Panglong Conference to join the Burman for gaining independence and forming the new Burma after independence. In this regard, Aung San

⁴² Matthew J. Walton, "Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma: The Myths of Panglong," *A Bimonthly Review of Contemporary Asian Affairs* 48, no. 6 (November/December 2008): 895.

⁴³ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 208.

⁴⁴ Sakhong, 211.

⁴⁵ Sakhong, 210-11.

⁴⁶ Maung Maung, *Burma's Constitution* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1959), 81.

claimed that the administration of the independent Burma would ensure political freedom for all ethnic minorities to decide their internal affairs while at the same time protecting and securing their traditional democratic and cultural rights.⁴⁷ The ethnic leaders now decided to join the Burman in achieving independence from the British, because they were promised the right of self-determination to manage their internal affairs in freedom. As part of explaining why the ethnic leaders signed the Panglong Agreement on February 12, 1947, Sakhong writes, “the Chin, Kachin and Shan did not surrender their rights of self-determination and sovereignty to the Burman in the Panglong Agreement; they signed it as a means to speed up their own freedom together with the Burman and other nationalities in Burma.”⁴⁸ The Chin chiefs who participated in the Panglong Conference clearly insisted; “we want to rule our country by ourselves according to our own political systems” (*Kan ram cu kan mah te in le kan phunglam ning te in uk kan duh*).⁴⁹ Clarifying the reason why ethnic representatives signed the Panglong Agreement, Donnison states that “what they had agreed to was co-operation, and co-operation, not with independent Burma, but with the interim Burmese government, which still had a British Governor.”⁵⁰ The ethnic leaders agreed to co-operate with Burmans at this point, simply because they were promised their sociopolitical rights, including the right to self-determination, and even the right to secession after ten years of joining the free Burma. According to clause

⁴⁷ Mikael Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 1999), 50.

⁴⁸ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 214.

⁴⁹ Sakhong, 212.

⁵⁰ Donnison, *Burma*, 136-37.

5 of the 9 agreements signed at Panglong Conference, “full autonomy in internal administration for the Frontier Areas is accepted in principle.”⁵¹ In explaining why they signed the Panglong Agreement, a Shan representative was reported to say, “we want to associate with Burma on the condition that full autonomy is guaranteed in our internal administration, a federalist view echoed by Kachin and Chin witnesses.”⁵² Therefore, the Chin and other ethnic leaders signed the Panglong Agreement with the hope that they would be given the right to freely exercise their civil and political rights within their land. Ethnic leaders trusted Aung San because they saw him to focus on ensuring “an equal economic development and simultaneous independence for all ethnic groups.”⁵³ For securing the trust of the Chin delegates, Aung San asserted that the Chin would have the right to regain their freedom, independence, and sovereign nation-state status after joining the new Union of Burma.⁵⁴ Regarding how ethnic minority peoples would be treated on the basis of equality in this Union, Aung San famously stated, “if Burma receives one kyat, you will also get one kyat.”⁵⁵ Ethnic leaders signed the Panglong Agreement, for they were promised equal sociopolitical right in the independent Burma.

A month after the Panglong agreement was signed on February 12, 1947, a committee was set up by the Government in London, which was charged to inquire the future status of peoples of the Frontier Areas with regard to whether they should actually

⁵¹ Tucker, *Burma*, 122.

⁵² Tucker, 125.

⁵³ Martin Smith, *Ethnic Groups in Burma: Development, Democracy and Human Rights* (London: Anti-Slavery International, 1994), 26.

⁵⁴ Lap Yan Kung, “Love Your Enemies: A Theology for Aliens in Their Native Land: The Chin in Myanmar,” *Studies in World Christianity* 15, no. 1 (2009): 85.

⁵⁵ Smith, *Ethnic Groups in Burma*, 24.

be included within the new Burma. After having analyzed their sociopolitical identities and experiences in a careful manner, the committee finally proposed that peoples of the Frontier Areas (ethnic minorities) should be included in the new Burma but with the right to secede, which was then enshrined in the Constitution of Burma materialized in 1947.⁵⁶ Considering all the background factors leading up to the successful signing of the Panglong Agreement between Aung San and ethnic leaders, we can say that the Chin decided to join Burmans in securing independence, because they were promised the right to self-determination with regard to their sociopolitical affairs within the new Union of Burma. The problem, however, is that the Panglong Agreement is never respected in the history of modern Burma, meaning the Chin and other ethnic peoples never see the chance to see the Panglong Agreement being materialized. In what follows, we will see how the failure of the historic Agreement affects the Chin and other ethnic peoples.

Burmese Nationalism

The fate of the Panglong Agreement upon which ethnic peoples base the hope for their political future turned to be practically fragile when Aung San and his colleagues were gracelessly shot down by U Saw's gunmen on July 19, 1947.⁵⁷ In the words of Donnison, the death of Aung San and his colleagues is "a loss from which Burma has not yet recovered, and from which it is probable that she never will recover."⁵⁸ The killing of Aung San is broadly interpreted as the price he paid for his bold policy of the federated

⁵⁶ Donnison, *Burma*, 137.

⁵⁷ Maung, *Assassination of Aung San*, 15.

⁵⁸ Donnison, *Burma*, 139.

union of Burma in which ethnic minorities would freely enjoy their political rights, namely, the right to self-determination, and the right to decide their political future. Aung San's ideology of political pluralism was unthinkable to U Saw, because the latter always held a different view on what Burma should look like after the independence. While Aung San was in favor of creating an independent Burma in which all the ethnic minorities would enjoy the right to decide their sociopolitical future, and even the right to secede from the Union, U Saw always insisted that all ethnic minorities should be integrated within the Union of Burma at the expense of restricting their sociopolitical rights. When U Saw attended the Panglong Conference in March 1946 and met with attending chiefs who represented their peoples, Maung Maung writes, "he called on the chiefs to unite with the Burmese and other peoples on their march to freedom."⁵⁹ When accompanying Aung San's delegation who met with Prime Minister Attlee and discussed the political future of Burma, U Saw and Basein disassociated themselves from the Agreement signed by Attlee and Aung San in London, because they held that Aung San's political vision would be a threat to the future of the Union of Burma.⁶⁰ U Saw was reportedly opposed to the Aung San-Attlee's Agreement, condemning it as entailing "the implicit threat of dividing Burma into parts."⁶¹ Undeniably, U Saw came to disagree with Aung San's policy, because the former explicitly pushed for having a united Burma with the permanent participation of all ethnic minorities. While the killing of Aung San by U

⁵⁹ Maung, *Assassination of Aung San*, 10.

⁶⁰ Aung, *A History of Burma*, 306.

⁶¹ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 210.

Saw has been largely viewed as a sign of power struggle in Burma's leadership as well as a dislike for San's political leadership, what is undeniable is that the nationalist U Saw orchestrated this merciless murder, for he was completely opposed to the progressive political thought of Aung San who embraced political pluralism by insisting that ethnic minorities should have full political right and freedom in the independent Burma.

Seeing that the Chin, Kachin, and Shan showed the desire to gain independence together with Burman as embodied in the Panglong Agreement, the British government continued to work with U Nu, who was named the leader of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) and Prime Minister of the Union of Burma after the death of Aung San.⁶² U Nu went to London and signed the Aung San-Attlee Independence Treaty with Prime Minister Attlee on October 17, 1947, without making any change on it.⁶³ After everything was negotiated and agreed from both sides, Burma was declared an independent sovereign nation on January 4, 1948.⁶⁴ The Chin, Kachin, and Shan now formally joined the Union of Burma to begin their new political life with Burman with the hope for enjoying the right to execute their sociopolitical matters in freedom. The problem, however, is that these ethnic minorities, who never had political connection with Burman before British's annexation, did not duly receive their political expectations in the periods after independence. In spite of many disappointments, the Chin, Kachin and Shan as signatories to the treaty of Panglong remained loyal to the central

⁶² Sakhong, 218.

⁶³ Aung, *A History of Burma*, 308.

⁶⁴ Aung.

government of Burma in the following years after independence, expecting that Burman leaders would grant them the status and rights promised at the Panglong Conference.⁶⁵

With the official installation of U Nu as the new leader of the Union of Burma, who served as Prime Minister during 1947-58 and 1960-62, things turned out to be completely different regarding how the Burman politicians viewed and engaged the issues of the ethnic minorities in Burma. From the beginning, U Nu proved to be someone who was not supportive of Aung San's policy on political pluralism and secularism.⁶⁶ While Aung San showed the desire to respect and protect the socio-political rights of ethnic peoples, U Nu was driven by the spirit of Burman nationalism which aimed at Burmanizing ethnic peoples in order to fully integrate them into the full Burman societal and political structure. Regarding how U Nu and other Burman leaders neglected a new Burmese political structure embodied in the Panglong Agreement, Mang argues,

After Aung San was assassinated, the Burman chose not to respect the Panglong Agreement, which promised the Chin (and other minority groups in highland Burma) self-determination and full autonomy in a federal democratic system of government in their ancient homeland and effectively centralized state power, which only led to Burman supremacy, but also deepened ethnic nationalism among ethnic minorities who joined the Burman in forming the Union of Burma.⁶⁷

When he was in attendance at the Panglong Conference in Shan State in March 1946, U Nu, the then Vice-President of the AFPFL, joined U Saw in calling the ethnic chiefs to unite with Burmans in their struggle for freedom from the British rule.⁶⁸ Even as Aung San always favored "a union of the different ethnic groups as equal participants and with

⁶⁵ Matthews J. Walton, "The Wages of Burman-ness: Ethnicity and Burman Privilege in Contemporary Myanmar," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, no. 1 (2012): 10.

⁶⁶ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 218.

⁶⁷ Mang, "Christianity and Ethnic Identity in Burma," 102.

⁶⁸ Maung, *Assassination of Aung San*, 10.

special rights accorded to the national minorities,”⁶⁹ his political vision for the future of the free Burma was effectively undermined by his Burman successors who “overturned his political ideals by refusing to accommodate non-Buddhist and non-Burman ethnic groups and by Burmanizing the entire country, which naturally resulted in provoking ethnic minorities into armed rebellion and sinking the young nation into political crisis.”⁷⁰ Far from showing any commitment to continuing Aung San’s political ideology, U Nu emphasized national unity at the expense of paying careless attention to the distinct cultural, religious, and social identities of the ethnic peoples. With regard to the reason why U Nu was reluctant to take into consideration the issues of ethnic minorities, Gravers claims, “special rights for ethnic minorities appeared to him as a continuation of the divide-and-rule policy of imperialism.”⁷¹ The hope that ethnic minorities would have special rights and the right to self-determination within the Union of Burma began to die as U Nu adhered to the spirit of Burmese nationalism and unduly pushed the policy of Burmanization in his power, thereby ignoring their distinct sociopolitical identities.

U Nu’s political philosophy appeared to be even more problematic and outrageous, as he was committed to making Buddhism the state religion. He clearly pledged his supporters during his election campaign in 1960 that, if elected, he would make Buddhism the state religion.⁷² While king Anawrahta who ruled during CE 1044-

⁶⁹ Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma*, 44.

⁷⁰ Mang, “The Politics of Religious Conversion among the Ethnic Chin in Burma,” 199.

⁷¹ Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma*, 56.

⁷² Donnison, *Burma*, 161.

1077,⁷³ and is known as the first Burman king in the pre-modern history of Burma for making Buddhism the national religion of the people in his kingdom,⁷⁴ U Nu is widely seen as the modern Burman nationalist leader who effectively renewed the old Burman nationalist ideology by making Buddhism the national religion of modern Burma, thereby attempting every effort in his power to force all people in Burma to embrace Buddhism as their professed religion. In opposing the religiously pluralistic nature of the country, U Nu was reportedly active in elevating Buddhism and upgrading Buddhist infrastructure in several key areas of the national life. As part of promoting Buddhism in the country, U Nu approved the building of a World Peace Pagoda (*Kaba Aye Seti*) in the heart of Yangon City. His main objective of making Buddhism “a superordinate political ideology” reveals his belief that this religion was useful to promote unity, peace, and progress in the country.⁷⁵ Just as he pledged to establish Buddhism as the state religion at a conference of the clean AFPFL held in September 1959,⁷⁶ he finally pushed through the constitutional amendment at parliament on August 26, 1961, during which he reportedly declared: “Buddhism being the religion professed by the great majority of the citizens of the Union shall be the state religion.”⁷⁷ Not surprisingly, the establishment of the state religion angered the non-Buddhists such as the Kachin, Karen, Chin, and other racial

⁷³ Donald M. Seekins, *Historical Dictionary of Burma (Myanmar)* (Oxford: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2006), 68.

⁷⁴ Aung, *A History of Burma*, 36.

⁷⁵ Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma*, 57.

⁷⁶ Maung Maung, *Burma and General Ne Win* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1969), 271.

⁷⁷ Maung, 284.

communities.⁷⁸ Indeed, the attempt of making Buddhism the state religion runs the risk of replacing other religions confessed by various ethnic minorities.⁷⁹ The adoption of Buddhism as the state religion appeared to the ethnic Chin and Kachin as the evidence of Burmanization from the Burman, which led to the Kachin uprising in the year 1961.⁸⁰ The Chin rebellion, which emerged in 1964 and was led by Hrang Nawl, was basically preceded by U Nu's careless attempt of making of Buddhism to be the state religion.⁸¹ The establishing of Buddhism as a state religion not only furthered the Burmanization of the country, but also revived the communal tensions between the Burman Buddhist majority and non-Buddhist minority groups in Burma.⁸² Needless to say, U Nu intentionally used Buddhism as a political mechanism to advance and secure his nationalist policy.⁸³ But Nu's way of using religion for advancing his political interests only deepened distrust of Burmese political leadership in the hearts of all ethnic peoples.

The Chin under Ne Win's Rule

The practice of the multi-ethnic parliamentary democracy came to an end when General Ne Win seized power in a military coup on March 2, 1962.⁸⁴ He staged this coup

⁷⁸ Maung, 290.

⁷⁹ Gravers, *Nationalism as Political Paranoia in Burma*, 55.

⁸⁰ Gravers, 59.

⁸¹ Lian H. Sakhong, *In Defense of Identity: The Ethnic Nationalities' Struggle for Democracy, Human Rights, and Federalism in Burma* (Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2010), 282.

⁸² Maureen Aung-Thwin and Thant Myint-U, "The Burmese Way to Socialism," *Third World Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (1992): 71.

⁸³ Josef Silverstein, *Burma: Military Rule and the Politics of Stagnation* (London: Cornell University Press, 1977), 24.

⁸⁴ Smith, *Ethnic Groups in Burma*, 25.

because he wanted to govern the entire nation with one-party policy, which would pay little attention to the sociopolitical concerns of ethnic peoples. In analyzing what initially moved Ne Win to overthrow the civilian government led by U Nu, Ne Win's spokesman pinpoints economic, religious, and political crises as chief concerns while describing federalism issue as the most important reason worrying Ne Win.⁸⁵ Thus, the demand for federalism is seen as one of the fears that drove this military takeover.⁸⁶ According to Cockett, the military coup of 1962, which brought Ne Win to power, marked "the beginning of the all-out, state-sponsored drive towards Burmanization."⁸⁷ While addressing on Union Day in 1964, Ne Win declared that economic development of the entire nation was his priority, stressing that each ethnic group in the country would be responsible for developing their language, culture, literature, and customs. In defending the idea of national unity he warned that all ethnic groups would not exercise their particular rights and the right to succession that threatened the national unity in Burma.⁸⁸

Burma was now effectively brought under the new authoritarian rule of Burma controlled by Ne Win, who imposed the authoritarian values and institutions on the basis of his knowledge of the East European socialist state models.⁸⁹ In the name of creating a strong united nation based on the socialist principle, Ne Win imposed "the use of a single language and the development of a national culture based on Burman values and

⁸⁵ Aung-Thwin and Myint-U, "The Burmese Way to Socialism," 72.

⁸⁶ Walton, "The Wages of Burman-ness," 14.

⁸⁷ Richard Cockett, *Blood, Dreams and Gold: The Changing Face of Burma* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 79.

⁸⁸ Silverstein, *Burma*, 113-14.

⁸⁹ Robert I. Rotberg, "Introduction Prospects for a Democratic Future," *Burma: Prospects for A Democratic Future*, edited by Robert I. Rotberg (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998), 24.

ideals.”⁹⁰ For Smith, the rise of Ne Win’s dictatorship clearly hampered and troubled the life and experience of ethnic peoples in Burma, because it intended to defeat, to unite and Burmanize the society.⁹¹ His socialist society was to be achieved under a rigid one-party system.⁹² As Silverstein puts it, Ne Win chose to apply socialism because he saw it as “a necessary form of social control to restrict the unbridled freedom of individual man and channel his energy and effort socially useful and constructive paths.”⁹³ In defense of Ne Win’s socialist policy, Maung Maung, who was a Burman scholar being loyal to Ne Win, writes that Win laid out a new picture of the Union which consisted of many indigenous races, who like “the members of the family must live and work together in unity, amity, and harmony.”⁹⁴ In support of Ne Win’s unpopular policy the Burman scholar further contends that “the Burmese way to Socialism is the Programme of Beuatitudes for the society in the Union of Burma.”⁹⁵ Ne Win’s policy of socialism, however, never appeared to serve the best interests of the people in Burma. Since its early years his regime was notorious for nationalizing public lands and private properties, and for expelling all foreign missionaries in 1966, including the Johnsons, who became the last American Baptist missionaries to the Chin.⁹⁶

⁹⁰ Rotberg, 25.

⁹¹ Rotberg.

⁹² Smith, *Ethnic Groups in Burma*, 26.

⁹³ Silverstein, *Burma*, 82.

⁹⁴ Maung, *Burma and General Ne Win*, 312.

⁹⁵ Maung, 317.

⁹⁶ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 226.

In a move to further consolidate the country with his military power, Ne Win paved the way for the emergence of a new Constitution in 1974. The Constitution, in principle, embodies “guarantees for the basic rights of all citizens regardless of race, religion, status or sex.”⁹⁷ However, the neglect of the ethnic nationalities like the Chin continued to exist under this Constitution.⁹⁸ Far from finding a constructive solution to the issues of ethnic minorities, the 1974 Constitution perpetuated the military rule through a one-party system by blending the old authoritarian rule with the new legalized form of dictatorship.⁹⁹ Ne Win’s authoritarian rule became even more oppressive when it formed and controlled the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), the only political party allowed by this national Constitution. Neglecting the reasonable political concerns of the Panglong Agreement signed by ethnic minorities leaders, Mang asserts, the Burman leaders drafted the 1974 Constitution in a way to keep a centralized state power in the hands of the Burman, thereby strengthening Burman privilege and hegemony among non-Burman peoples politically and culturally.¹⁰⁰ In analyzing how the Constitution neglects the concerns and issues of ethnic minorities, Silverstein states,

The unitary structure embodied in the 1974 constitution ends all discussion about ethnic states and the right of secession. In theory, it assures cohesion and unity in all the territory of the nation. In fact, it fails to satisfy the desires and hopes of the ethnic minorities who have been in revolt against Burmanization and the total integration of their historic territory into a single political unit.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ Smith, *Ethnic Groups in Burma*, 26.

⁹⁸ Smith, 37.

⁹⁹ Rotberg, “Introduction Prospects for a Democratic Future,” 24.

¹⁰⁰ Mang, “The Politics of Religious Conversion among the Ethnic Chin in Burma,” 201.

¹⁰¹ Silverstein, *Burma*, 125.

Abandoning Aung San's political vision of "Unity in Diversity" and the federate structure as expressed in the 1947 Constitution, Smith argues, Ne Win adopted "a two-fold strategy: to run an all-out counter-insurgency campaign in the rural countryside while at the same time trying to establish a centralized, one-party system of government radiating out from Rangoon into the ethnic minority states."¹⁰² In holding the exclusive policy that the one party system was the best means for securing the national unity in Burma at the cost of silencing and suppressing the voice of ethnic minority peoples, Ne Win's government captured and imprisoned ethnic leaders who spoke for freedom and self-determination, while "allowing others their freedom as long as they remained silent and uncritical and supported the new regime."¹⁰³ In October 1972, Ne Win's regime arrested and detained almost 50 Chin leaders for two years without trial—including students, lawyers, doctors, teachers, and high-ranking government servants being accused of taking step to mobilize the Chin in favor of federalism and influencing the process of constitution redrafting which took place under Ne Win's Revolutionary Council.¹⁰⁴ After having suffered from the authoritarian rule of Ne Win for more than two decades the people of Burma took to street and protested against it on August 8, 1988, with thousands of people boldly calling for democracy and freedom in Burma. Launching a brutal response to the demonstrations still remembered as the 8-8-88 uprising, the military killed about 3,000 people during the weeks of the crackdown and imprisoned many.¹⁰⁵In

¹⁰² Smith, *Ethnic Groups in Burma*, 25.

¹⁰³ Silverstein, *Burma*, 111.

¹⁰⁴ Chin Human Rights Organization, *Threats to our Existence*, 20-21.

¹⁰⁵ Human Rights Watch, *We Are Like Forgotten People*, 11.

short, the rule of Ne Win embodies Burmese nationalism wholly committed to suppressing the struggle for democracy, freedom and the right to self-determination.

Burmanization of the Chin

What made the political situation of Burma even worse was that without preparing to address the will of the people in a peaceful and constructive manner, General Saw Maung seized power in a military coup and established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) on 18 September 1988, replacing BSPP.¹⁰⁶ Realizing that Burmese peoples' demand for freedom and democracy was now undeniable, the leaders of SLORC held national election in 1990, in which the National League for Democracy (NLD) was declared the winning party. The result of the election was a landslide victory for the NLD, which took 392 out of 492 seats with its voter turnout being 72.6 per cent.¹⁰⁷ Most tragically, the military regime did not allow the winning party to form a civilian government, which was the desire of all people in Burma. Instead of handing over power to the NLD party, the military annulled the result of the election, thereby telling the people that the country first needed to have a constitution before formally exercising the rule of democracy. Starting from 1992, the SLORC government organized a national convention to draft the principle for a new constitution. The convention's immediate objective was, Rotberg argues, "to write a basic law that would give the military permanent political control at all levels of government."¹⁰⁸ While the military rulers were

¹⁰⁶ Physicians for Human Rights, *Life under The Junta: Evidence of Crimes against Humanity in Burma's Chin State* (Cambridge: Physicians for Human Rights, 2011), 15.

¹⁰⁷ Koukett, *Blood, Dreams and Gold*, 179.

¹⁰⁸ Rotberg, "Introduction Prospects for A Democratic Future," 27.

taking 14 years for drawing the Constitution, their regime was notorious for its human rights violations, cracking down any activity calling for the emergence of democracy. In suppressing the Chin during this awful period, the military regime required them to porter military supplies, labor as unpaid servants, build roads, and do hard labor. According to the report of Physicians for Human Rights, the gross violations of human beings perpetuated by the Burmese military against the Chin included forced conscriptions into military service, beatings, torture, intimidations, rape, killings, disappearances, and persecution based on ethnicity or Christian faith.¹⁰⁹ The military rule appeared to be more oppressive to the Chin and other minorities as it changed its name from SLORC to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in 1997, only to justify and legalize its authoritarian leadership, and to mitigate international condemnation.

The military regime was able to manage its supervised Constitution to be approved through the sham referendum held in May 2008. Even as it was meant to inaugurate a civilian government, the 2008 Constitution had been intentionally designed to perpetuate the military rule and Burman nationalism originated by U Nu and Ne Win known for their dangerous policy of Burmanizing ethnic minorities in the country. As already said, U Nu and Ne Win were notorious for their racial and religious assimilation policies which led them to create a unitary state and a homogeneous nation in Burma at the expense of neglecting the sociopolitical concerns and experiences of the ethnic minorities.¹¹⁰ Their commitment to creating a homogeneous nation betrayed the heart of the Panglong Agreement (1947) founded on the principles of equality, mutual trust and

¹⁰⁹ Physicians for Human Rights, *Life under the Junta*, 5.

¹¹⁰ Sakhong, *In Defense of Identity*, 12.

recognition, which would have prevented the act of integrating ethnic societies and their lands into the Myanmar Buddhist society.¹¹¹ Ignoring the political vision of the Panglong Agreement, the military regime continued U Nu's policy of state religion and Ne Win's national consolidation policy for assimilating all ethnic minorities into *Myanmar-lumyo* (Burman/Myanmar race). Following the Burmanization policy of U Nu and Ne Win, the successive military authorities focused on the nation-building process in that there must be only one race, one language, one religion in Myanmar.¹¹² In this way, they attempted to consolidate all ethnic peoples into one race that speaks one language (Burmese) and practices one religion (Buddhism). In arguing how the Chin have been subjected to the Burmanization policy of the Burmese military regime, Mang contends, "the Burmese government was so determined to remove the history, culture and language of ethnic minorities from the face of the country that it thoroughly enforced various restrictions on Chin culture, literature and language while fostering Burman culture, history and language."¹¹³ As a result, the Chin constantly lived in fear under the rule of military leaders who are determined to do anything in their power to control minority peoples.

As part of implementing its Burmanization policy, the SPDC government unfairly mandated that Burmese be used as the standard language of instruction, which brought non-native speakers of Burmese to an educational disadvantage and limited the opportunities for ethnic peoples to develop literatures in their own languages.¹¹⁴ The

¹¹¹ Sakhong, 23,

¹¹² Sakhong, 27.

¹¹³ Mang, "The Politics of Religious Conversion among the Ethnic Chin in Burma," 200.

¹¹⁴ Walton, "The Wages of Burman-ness," 15.

ordering of Burmese to be the sole language for teaching throughout the entire country's schools systems denied ethnic minority peoples the right to use, teach, or learn their own language.¹¹⁵ As Walton puts it correctly, "the field of education is another area in which we can see Burman privilege reinforced and non-Burman culture and identity devalued or even attacked."¹¹⁶ The political messages conveyed through textbooks emphasize the traditions of nationalism and militarism are essentially linked to a Burman identity.¹¹⁷ In fact, both curriculum and textbooks in Burma education were deliberately designed to assimilate ethnic minorities into Burman nationality.¹¹⁸ As a consequence, the Chin could not study their native languages at public schools while at the same time being denied governmental support to develop and expand them. As Walton says, "while learning a non-Burman language is choice that Burmans are privileged in being able to make, in most areas of the country, non-Burmans must learn Burmese as a matter of survival."¹¹⁹

In making Chin state less Chin and less Christian, Walton argues, the military regime not only prohibited the teaching of Chin language in public schools but also constructed Pagodas on mountains of the Chin State with central government funds.¹²⁰ The military removed wooden crosses symbolizing the Christian faith and replaced them with pagodas, thereby depriving the Chin of their innate rights of religious freedom and

¹¹⁵ Koukett, *Blood, Dreams and Gold*, 80.

¹¹⁶ Walton, "The Wages of Burman-ness," 15.

¹¹⁷ South and Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar," 134.

¹¹⁸ South and Lall, 134.

¹¹⁹ Walton, "The Wages of Burman-ness," 15.

¹²⁰ Kung, "Love Your Enemies," 88.

pushing them into the further process of Burmanization.¹²¹ Denying their distinct social, cultural, and religious identities, the military regime always targeted the Chin with their Burmanization policy, thereby requiring them to prove their loyalty to the Burmese nation by adopting the Burmese culture.¹²² That the military rulers resolved to subject the Chin to the Burman culture reflects the notion that the Burman think they are superior to other ethnic minorities who are deemed to adapt to Burman civilization and culture. Hugh Tinker, a colonial administrator, was reported to comment in the period after independence, “it is not pleasant to see Burman public men behaving towards their frontier colleagues like a ‘master race,’ insisting that the only true Burmese is a Burman Buddhist.”¹²³ Regarding how the military rulers have ignored the fate of ethnic minorities who were promised at Panglong Conference to enjoy their sociopolitical and cultural rights in the independent Burma, Cockett says, “post-war Burma excluded the possibility of allowing any authentic expression of the culture and religion of the many other indigenous ethnic groups that were supposed to share the territory of Burma with the majority Burmans in the newly independent country.”¹²⁴ The Chin now find themselves in a place where they live in constant fear for the loss of their culture, language, and religion. A fuller picture of how the Chin are forced to convert to Buddhism can be visible as we turn to how military authorities use Buddhism as their political tool.

¹²¹ Mang, “Christianity and Ethnic Identity in Burma,” 104.

¹²² Walton, “The Wages of Burman-ness,” 13.

¹²³ Walton, 9.

¹²⁴ Coukett, *Blood, Dreams and Gold*, 77.

In pushing their policy of Burmanization as a means to dominate the Chin, the military rulers are committed to their mission of Buddhization among the Chin, which focused on forcing them to convert to Buddhism. From the beginning, as Cockett states, the military rulers tended to use Buddhism for the benefit of the regime, thereby making it another organ of the all-controlling state.¹²⁵ As part of extending their mission of Buddhization, the Burman army and monks built Buddhist pagodas in areas of Chin State where there are very few Buddhists.¹²⁶ Since the 1990s, the military regime has run a separate Ministry of Religious Affairs for promoting and propagating Buddhist teachings across the country.¹²⁷ While increasing the government's spending on Buddhist infrastructure, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has placed unfair restrictions on building Christian infrastructure and other Christian activities. In the name of the Hill Regions Buddhist Mission controlled by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, the Buddhist monks being loyal to military rule were sent to monasteries in Chin, Kachin, and Naga areas for Buddhizing ethnic peoples in those regions by establishing the program of the Border Areas and National Races Development commonly known by its Burmese acronym—Na Ta La—which basically intends to coerce conversion to Buddhism at schools.¹²⁸ As reported by Chin Human Rights Organization, children at Na Ta La schools are

¹²⁵ Cockett, *Blood, Dreams and Gold*, 70.

¹²⁶ Human Rights Watch, *We Are Like Forgotten People*, 50.

¹²⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Hidden Plight: Christian Minorities in Burma*, Research and Report by Rachael Fleeming, 3.
<https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/Hidden%20Plight.%20Christian%20Minorities%20in%20Burma.pdf>.

¹²⁸ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 3-4.

reportedly forced to convert to Buddhism during their education.¹²⁹ Meanwhile, the military regime's controlled Ministry of Border Affairs explicitly incentivized the conversion of Na Ta La graduates by guaranteeing prominent jobs on finishing their studies if they would officially convert to Buddhism.¹³⁰ Many young Chin adopted Buddhism, because they loved to enjoy certain social privileges given to Buddhists.

The 2008 Constitution describes the “special position of Buddhism” as the faith of the majority while providing for some religious freedom protections.¹³¹ However, a careful study shows that the Constitution basically fails to provide adequate protection of freedom of religion or belief.¹³² Due to confessing Christianity as their religion, the Chin have been facing discrimination in their socio-political and economic life within the Union of Burma. Many Chins have experienced being denied to their promotions at government sectors on the basis of their ethnicity or religion. Even when they got governmental jobs, they were given less-desirable postings, lower salaries, and passed over for promotions.¹³³ This means that the Myanmar law and policy not only fails to offer protection for religious minorities, but also it actively discriminates against non-

¹²⁹ Chin Human Rights Organization, *Stable and Secure? An Assessment on the Current Context of Human Rights for Chin People in Burma/Myanmar* (Chin Human Rights Organization, Hakha: Unpublished Document, 2018), 32.

¹³⁰ Chin Human Rights Organization, 33.

¹³¹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, *Hidden Plight*, 4.

¹³² Chin Human Rights Organization, *Stable and Secure*, 22.

¹³³ Human Rights Watch, 20.

Buddhist religions in many practical areas.¹³⁴ The attempt of forcing the Chin to convert to Buddhism shows how Buddhism is used as a tool for furthering Burmese nationalism.

Economic Problems

The long decades of the military rule resulted in a rapid decline in the function of the economy of Myanmar/Burma. In December 1987, the United Nations admitted Burma to “least Developed Country” status as one of the world’s ten poorest countries.¹³⁵ Undeniably, five decades of the military rule with its political dysfunction and economic mismanagement caused widespread poverty across Burma. In 1962, Burma became one of the wealthiest countries in Southeast Asia with the annual income sitting around \$670, which was more than three times that of Indonesia and more than twice that of Thailand.¹³⁶ By 2010, the situation was significantly reversed. Burma has now totally lost the status of its wealth fame in 1962. The International Monetary Fund estimated that Burma had South-East Asia’s lowest GDP per head in 2011, recorded by the World Bank as \$824.19.¹³⁷ This means that at least half of the population in Burma still lives on less than \$2 a day.¹³⁸ Though the Chin representatives signed the Panglong Agreement with the hope for receiving the right to a greater political freedom as well as a better economic life, the military rule has ignored the economic condition of the Chin. When the United Nation Development Program (UNDP) held a household survey across Burma in 2005, it

¹³⁴ Chin Human Rights Organization, *Stable and Secure*, 22.

¹³⁵ Smith, *Ethnic Groups in Burma*, 32.

¹³⁶ Koukett, *Blood, Dreams and Gold*, 157-58.

¹³⁷ Koukett, 157-58.

¹³⁸ Koukett, 157-58.

discovered that some 70 percent of the population in Chin State were living below the poverty line and 40 percent were without adequate food. Indeed, the poverty of Chin State is the consequence of the lack of infrastructures, natural resources, and economic opportunities hindered by the Burmanization policy of the military rule notorious for its pervasive human rights violations.¹³⁹ When UNDP published Burma's poverty profile again in June 2011, it reported that Chin State is by far the poorest state in Burma, with 73 percent of people living below the poverty line.¹⁴⁰ Richard Koukett, who visited Kanpalet township in Chin State in 2014 with World Bank representatives, claims, "Traditionally, the hill peoples have always been the most marginalized in the country and so I might have concluded from my visit to the Chin villages that these were probably the poorest people in Burma."¹⁴¹ Neglected by the military government, the Chin do not have good economy, cannot produce enough food for their subsistence, and depend on other regions for food provisions.¹⁴² Decades of neglect and widespread abuses have destabilized the Chin and rendered them vulnerable to abject poverty.¹⁴³

Because there are no industries or factories in Chin State and very few job opportunities, an estimated 85 percent of the Chin are subsistence farmers, depending on the slash-and-burn practices, also known as shifting cultivation.¹⁴⁴ This system of the

¹³⁹ Human Rights Watch, *We Are Like Forgotten People*, 19.

¹⁴⁰ Chin Human Rights Organization, *Threats to our Existence*, 31.

¹⁴¹ Koukett, *Blood, Dreams and Gold*, 160-61.

¹⁴² Human Rights Watch, *We Are Like Forgotten People*, 19.

¹⁴³ Physicians for Human Rights, *Life under the Junta*, 10.

¹⁴⁴ Chin Human Rights Organization, *Threats to Our Existence*, 30.

agricultural activity remains the mainspring of their economic system not because it is a productive economy, but because there is no job opportunity in Chin State. Farms are established on sloping hillsides, which are prone to erosion. Chin farmers grow their crops and plants in accordance with the three seasons of hot, wet, and cold.¹⁴⁵ However, the effect of climate change now makes it practically challenging for the Chin to depend on this slash-and-burn cultivation system as the main substance for livelihoods. Although they do not see this cultivation as sustainable or productive, the Chin still need to depend on it, because there are very few job opportunities available in Chin State and the Chin do not have alternative economic sources which are productive and effective for them. Their lack of economic opportunity just reveals how they have suffered under the military rule.

The Sociopolitical Situation after 2010

The undemocratic Constitution was ratified in 2008. After more than five decades of the military rule, the national election was held in October 2010 in accordance with the 2008 Constitution which reserves 25 percent of parliament seats for unelected military personnel. The military backed-party Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won the 2010 election boycotted by the National League for Democracy (NLD), and ruled the country until 2015. From the beginning, the USDP government appeared to show interest in bringing about change in executive, legislative, and judicial areas. The USDP government was committed to brokering for peace agreement between Myanmar military and ethnic armed groups, releasing thousands of political prisoners, bringing about economic developments, and producing significant breakthroughs in healthcare and

¹⁴⁵ Lehman, *The Structure of the Chin Society*, 7.

education. As such, the USDP government was viewed as being willing to bring about significant reforms and improvement of education system, including elements of decentralization.¹⁴⁶ Its support for achieving ceasefire with ethnic arms group resulted in inviting and welcoming the leaders of the Chin National Front to Hakha, the capital of Chin State in January 2012 for peace talks, who had been fighting for regaining self-determination right of the Chin people and for restoring democracy and federalism in the Union of Burma for decades.¹⁴⁷ The CNF delegates held political dialogue and signed ceasefire agreements with the USDP government, thereby achieving a most comprehensive bilateral agreement.¹⁴⁸ Also, the government invited the CNF to be a signatory to Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) signed in October 2015 by eight armed groups.¹⁴⁹ The action of the USDP government signaled a break with the past, ushering a new era for all people in Myanmar with regard to their sociopolitical life. However, this military-backed government still showed commitment to maintaining the old repressive policy of Burmese nationalism as President Thein Sein himself defended a Buddhist nationalist monk U Wirathu known as an extremist in his struggle for preserving the Burmese Race and Religion and for his anti-Muslim hatred activities. It is thus relevant to say that the USDP government stood as the defender of the policy of Burmese Race and Religion by way of using religious nationalism for its political ends.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁶ South and Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar," 146.

¹⁴⁷ Physicians for Human Rights, *Life under The Junta*, 15.

¹⁴⁸ United States Commission On International Religious Freedom, *Hidden Plight*, 7.

¹⁴⁹ United States Commission On International Religious Freedom.

¹⁵⁰ Benedict Rogers, *Burma: A Nation at the Crossroads* (London: Ebury Publishing, 2015) 237-38.

When the national election was held for the second time in November 2015, the opposition party National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory, for which the USDP government was praised as holding a free and fair election across the country. Led by its iconic leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD government earned credit for its remarkable deeds, including the appointing of a Chin ethnic Christian for the Vice President of the Union of Burma, a Kachin ethnic Christian for Speaker of the House of Peoples, and a Karen national for Speaker of the House of Nationalities. Such signs of constructive efforts revealed that the NLD government prepared to take more steps into the reform process by way of affirming the sociopolitical and economic rights of the people at a deeper level. Despite its struggle for achieving more changes, the NLD government, however, was not able to smoothly advance its political vision and mission due to the opposition of the military empowered by the 2008 Constitution. In the name of protecting the Union of Burma from disintegration standing as the core of the 2008 Constitution, the unelected military representatives attempt to control the Parliament by blocking any major step of reform process that would lessen the political privilege of the military or increase the possibility of true freedom, democracy, and federalism.

The third election of Myanmar was held in November 2020. The ruling NLD party won a landslide victory, which was denounced by military leaders Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and his associates as unfair, rigged, and fraudulent, but with no valid evidence. Arresting State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint, the Myanmar military came to stage the most unjust, shameful and illegitimate coup on February 1, 2021, the day when the new Parliament was scheduled to convene. The old painful memories of how hegemonic Burmese nationalist politics had crippled the

aspirations for true freedom and democracy in Myanmar's history now repeated itself on the scene of the political process. People from all parts of the country took to the streets in protest against the coup, calling for an immediate return of power to the elected civilian government. Many government workers took part in a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in protest against the coup. Ignoring the mounting public voices, the military gracelessly countered the mass protest with forceful brutality, which involved the unlawful arrests, imprisonments, and killings of countless peaceful protesters.

Having realized that the nationwide protest was no longer effective for making the military to return power to the elected civilian government, young protesters in all parts of the country resorted to arm revolt to fight against the military regime. Supported by National Unity Government (NUG), which was formed by elected PMs in the 2020 election and representatives of Ethnic Arms Organizations (EAOs), the People Defense Forces (PDF) received training from the EAOs and has now become an active resistance force in the country fighting for the return of democracy. In the same manner, the Chinland Defense Forces (CDF) formed among the Chin young people and trained by Chin National Front (CNF) has been fighting against the military in Chin State for the sake of the restoration of freedom, democracy, and federalism. As already said, the Chin National Front (CNF) has been taking arms since 1988 for defending the Chin national identity from the politics of Burmanization and for achieving the self-determination of the Chin and a federal system of government in Burma based on equality and democracy.¹⁵¹ In countering the emerging public resistance in all parts of the country the military has arrested, tortured, imprisoned and killed thousands of people. Anyway, the

¹⁵¹ Mang, "Christianity and Ethnic Identity in Burma," 102-03.

deadly emergence of the 2021 military coup and the military's merciless response to the rising revolution of the people across the country unmistakably testify that the Burmese military is back on the track to revive the old Burmese nationalism which always opposes to the emergence of true freedom, democracy and federalism in Myanmar.

Summary

Our study of the sociopolitical history and experience of the Chin in Myanmar reveals that as an ethnic Christian minority people the Chin never have had the chance to enjoy political freedom and the right of self-determination due to the fact that they have always been subjected to the policy of Burmese nationalism which unjustly requires them to adapt to Burmese society, and convert to Buddhism. Even as they experienced a certain level of modern civilization from the British rule, the Chin were overtly opposed to it, because the British rulers tended to deepen their domination by strengthening the power of the local chiefs, which was oppressive to ordinary Chin people. Their joining of the Union of Burma turned out to be the worst decision the Chin had ever made in history, because successive Burman nationalist leaders were never interested in allowing ethnic peoples to have the right of self-determination to decide their internal affairs. Rather, their voices for freedom and democracy have been gracelessly silenced by the military leaders, who are perpetuating the repressive policy of Burmese nationalism for maintaining their control over all ethnic peoples in the country. The Chin have gone through endless cycle of suffering inflicted by political repression.

Therefore, the sociopolitical history and experiences of the Chin in Myanmar as described in this chapter should be taken as the contextual realities of the Chin, which should be addressed and reflected in the structure of a new Trinitarian theology to be

envisioned for Chin Christianity on the basis of the study of Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom. Such a theological enterprise should recognize that the dehumanized Chin need to be assured of how the triune God is in solidarity with them and how their relationship with God sustains and empowers them in their ongoing sociopolitical struggle. Meanwhile, it is necessary to acknowledge that what inspires the Chin to be hopeful and strong throughout their struggle under the Burmese military rule is nothing other than their adoption and practice of Christianity. In the next chapter, we will study how Christianity came to the Chin, how it transforms their lives, and how it helps them to form and maintain their identity in the face of the hegemonic Burmese nationalism.

CHAPTER 3

A STUDY OF CHIN CHRISTIANITY

A close study on the history and development of Chin Christianity¹ is both interesting and necessary, because it tells us how American Baptist missionaries sacrificed themselves for serving the Chin by preaching the Gospel while engaging in practical social services such as education, health and agriculture, and how Christianity turns out to be a transforming force in the religious, cultural, and social life of the Chin in their history. The Chin called the missionaries *Siangbawi*, which means “school lords,” in recognition of their role in establishing and running schools to promote education in their history. In seeking to gain a good understanding of how Chin Christianity emerged and developed, we will study the history of all American Baptist missionaries (1899-1966) for knowing how they advanced the Gospel, provided education and health services, or laid out the foundation of Christianity, which entirely changed the social, cultural, and religious life of the Chin. As we move to a new landscape of Chin Christianity in the post-missionary era, we will see how Christianity continued to build up the Chin as they

¹ There is a record confirming that Christianity was already in existence in the Chin Hills before the coming of the American Baptist missionary couple Arthur Carson and Laura Carson on March 15, 1899. We see that account in *Chin Church History* (Falam: Zomi Theological College, 2012), 42. A fuller report on the existence of Christianity before the coming of the American Baptist missionaries is also available in Bawi Dua’s thesis “A Reinterpretation of Chin Christian Spirituality beyond One Century in the Light of Martin Luther’s Freedom of a Christian” (MTh Thesis, Luther Seminary, 2019), 39-44. But this paper does not make a specific attempt to trace that record, because the Christianity that the Chin people have known from the beginning is the one that they received from the American Baptist missionaries, which is well rooted into their history and which shapes their life in a transforming way.

struggled to strengthen their new churches, spread the Gospel across the country, and also maintain their new religious identity in the face of persistent Burmese nationalist politics. This chapter argues that Christianity is vital for the Chin, because it serves for their positive transformation and development and that the prospect of enlarging the role of Christianity in the sociopolitical context requires us to see how missionaries attempted to cultivate Christianity as a transforming dynamic of the entire human life and how the Chin in the past embraced it as a preserving source of their religious and ethnic identity in the crushing face of Burmese nationalism. In the end, it will indicate that the prospect of the transformative role of Chin Christianity for its sociopolitical context today calls for having a new understanding of the triune God, which will empower them to positively engage their sociopolitical environment. First, we will study in detail the works of each missionary couple for knowing how much they loved and cared for the Chin, and how they were committed to the religious, cultural, and social transformation of the Chin.

Arthur E. Carson and Laura H. Carson

Known as the first American Baptist missionaries to the Chin, Arthur E. Carson and his wife, Laura H. Carson, arrived in Hakha on March 15, 1899. In her book *Pioneer Trails, Trials and Triumphs*, Laura Carson makes a historical note, “We arrived in Haka March 15, six weeks after setting out from Thayetmyo. We rented a little two-roomed house of Government and soon had our things in it and were settled down for work.”²

² Laura H. Carson, *Pioneer Trails, Trials and Triumphs* (New York: Baptist Board of Education, 1927), 161.

Laura Hardin Carson arrived in Burma on November 24, 1883, when she was 25 years old.³ She was working as a missionary to the Sgaw Karen Mission in Bassein.⁴ Her future husband, Arthur Carson, was appointed by the Mission Board for service to open up work among the Chin in 1886 and arrived in Burma in the same year.⁵ Arthur and Laura were already engaged just before the latter left for Burma three years earlier. They were married on December 18, 1886.⁶ While staying in Henzada, where the Karen lived, in the spring of 1887, the Mission Board authorized the Carsons to go up the country and search out for a convenient place to establish a new mission. In this way, they came to embrace Thayetmyo as the most strategic place for beginning new works among the Chin in the plain areas.⁷ Having received the permission of the British government for acquiring land, the Carsons moved to Thayetmyo where they established the first Chin mission, which happened in the summer of 1888.⁸ While actively engaging the mission for the Chin in Thayetmyo, the Carsons had a passion for reaching out to the Chin who lived in the Hills. They explained to the Mission Board through their letters that they had the desire to turn over their work in Thayetmyo to another missionary couple so that they might reach out the Chin in the Hills areas.⁹ Having received approval from the Board, the Carsons moved up to the Chin Hills, which had been occupied by British and Indian

³ Carson, 63.

⁴ Carson, 194.

⁵ Carson, 94.

⁶ Carson, 97.

⁷ Carson, 100.

⁸ Carson, 104.

⁹ Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 1, 16.

troops.¹⁰ At that time, the British authorities would allow a foreigner to live only in protected territories.¹¹ Seeing Hakha as a protected area, the Carsons chose it as their designated place where they would soon proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ, establish schools, hospitals, and whatever else for carrying out mission among the Chin.¹² The Superintendent of the Chin Hills was kind to them and graciously helped them by providing information so that they could start their new mission in Hakha.¹³ The British Captain Dury was responsible for securing the safe travels of the Carsons to Hakha. In what follows, we will come to see in more detail how the first missionary couple began and actually carried out their Chin mission in Hakha and other areas in the Chin Hills.

Thinking about the Carsons' first encounter with the Chin in their social, cultural, and religious world reminds us how Christianity was introduced to the Chin as a form of modern civilization by which the missionaries came to engage the whole structure of the primitive Chin society. Their interaction with the Chin during their first days led Mrs. Carson to describe them as very drunken, savage-looking, dirty, filthy, wild, pagan, and heathen.¹⁴ Describing their general background, Mrs. Carson says, the Chin were "a people who had no real idea of God, no adequate notion of sin, no worship whatever but individual, family or village offerings to evil spirits that they offered."¹⁵ As they came to think that the religion of the Chin was wrong and ineffective, the Carsons attempted to

¹⁰ Johnson, 22.

¹¹ Johnson, 26.

¹² Johnson, 26.

¹³ Carson, *Pioneer Trails, Trials and Triumphs*, 146.

¹⁴ Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 1, 48.

¹⁵ Carson, *Pioneer Trails, Trials and Triumphs*, 195.

make the Chin see that “the Christian faith could give not only eternal life to believers but also could raise the whole level of everyday life in education, in health, in family life, in morals, in governance, and even in agriculture and commerce.”¹⁶ This perception turned to be the basic principle that characterized the whole process of their emerging works.

Soon after their arrival in Hakha, Mr. Carson purchased the land where he erected the school building in 1900 and the bungalow in the following year. The Carsons studied the Chin language, which allowed them to do translation work, school work evangelism, and medical work as well.¹⁷ For improving the agricultural system of the Chin, Arthur Carson introduced new fruits, vegetables, and grains to the Chin.¹⁸ Apart from the works of construction and the translation of the catechism and hymns into the Hakha Chin dialect Mr. Carson made preaching tours on foot, carrying the Word of life to people living in the jungle villages.¹⁹ As Mrs. Carson indicates, “Mr. Carson devoted himself to language and evangelistic endeavor while I took charge of the school work. We tried not only to educate and Christianize the people but put forth every effort to provide some means by which they would be able to support a higher civilization.”²⁰ Carson baptized Shia Kaw on January 1, 1906, who became the first Chin convert in the Hakha area.²¹ Amid his continued commitment to work for the Chin, Arthur Carson faced the deterioration of his health prompted by an infection of the appendix, for which Dr. East

¹⁶ Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 1, 48.

¹⁷ Johnson, 53-56.

¹⁸ Johnson, 64.

¹⁹ Carson, *Pioneer Trails, Trials and Triumphs*, 190.

²⁰ Carson, 182.

²¹ Carson, 181.

advised him to return to America for surgery. But he did not follow the medical advice from his coworker due to his commitment to the job and the concern for the situation of funds.²² Dr. East operated on him as his condition had worsened. The operation seemed successful, but his heart began to fail the next day. Carson died on April 1, 1908, at the age of 47, after having served in Burma for 21 years and 4 months.²³

After the untimely death Carson, his wife, Laura, continued the mission work as teacher, translator, counselor and mentor until after she retired from work in the Chin Hills in 1921.²⁴ Mrs. Carson “gave herself wholly to the schools, to women’s works, and to the important translations, eventually producing the four Gospels and the Acts which went through the press in 1920, the year of her final departure.”²⁵ She managed the schools in the Hakha district, looked after the work among the women, gave time as much as possible to the translation of the gospels, and also took up the weekly translation of the Sunday school lessons.²⁶ The emotional attachment of the Chin to Laura Carson was deep, because she loved them and always cared for their spiritual and social transformation. When she was about to leave Hakha, one said to her, “this is a sad day for the Chins. We do not want you to leave us. You have been our mother for many years. When you are gone, we will be like orphans.”²⁷ Robert Johnson, the last missionary to the

²² Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 1, 163.

²³ Johnson, 165.

²⁴ Biak Hlei Mang, “A Chin History of the Encounter with British Colonial Rule and the American Baptist Mission Works in the Chin Hills: A Story of Cultural Adaptation and Transformation in Burma (Myanmar)” (PhD dissertation, Lutheran School of Theology, 2010), 151.

²⁵ Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 1, 376.

²⁶ Carson, *Pioneer Trails, Trials and Triumphs*, 222.

²⁷ Carson, 250.

Chin, remarks, “To my mind, Laura Carson was such a person. Through the years people still remember her as one who loved them and cared for them, wept for them, and was willing to do all in her power to bring to them the blessings of the Christian gospel.”²⁸ By the time she left Hakha in 1920, there were 10 organized churches in the Chin Hills with 800 baptized members and 24 native Christian workers.²⁹

Erik H. East and Emily J. East

The second American Baptist missionaries who came to the Chin Hills to work along with the Carsons as preacher of the Gospel and the medical doctor were Dr. Erik H. East and his wife, Emily J. East. Dr. East was appointed medical missionary to the Chin Hills by the American Baptist Mission Board on June 3, 1901, and was designated to Hakha.³⁰ When Arthur Carson welcomed him on March 21, 1902, he told the new missionary with a great sadness that he did not have any converts yet.³¹ While on a medical furlough, Dr. East was married to Emily Johnson in Chicago on August 5, 1903, who faithfully stood by him throughout his entire mission works in the Chin Hills.³²

It is undeniable that the Easts played the essential and remarkable role in spreading the Gospel in various parts of the Chin Hills. As he traveled to different parts of the Chin Hills for proclaiming the Gospel, Dr. East felt that it was necessary to send a teacher who would work in the Tiddim area. Therefore, he arranged for the Karen

²⁸ Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 1, 377.

²⁹ Johnson, 445.

³⁰ Johnson, 81.

³¹ Johnson, 85.

³² Johnson, 92.

teacher, Shwe Zan, his wife, and, baby, Samuel to leave for Khuasak in the Tiddim area on March 31, 1904, where they started a new school for the Siyins living there.³³ The Easts were overjoyed when they received an electrifying letter in July 1904, informing them of the good news about the first Chin converts. This letter from Shwe Zan says,

The time when we arrived here in Koset (Khuasak) till this time, we try as well as we can for preaching, so that one man name Paung Shwin (Pau Suan), among his three chiefs which you had been seeing, he believes Jesus can save him from his sin into life. He gave up all the bad things and come to us for worship God together every time with his wife and mother As he knew more about Christ he preach more and more to other people. The time when you come to Koset he will be baptized at once One man name's Tum Harm (Thuam Hang); he is chief among the three chiefs. Now he begins to believe Jesus.³⁴

After seven years of the arrival of Christianity to the Chin Hills, the most significant event in the history of the Chin people was realized when Dr. East baptized seven new converts in the village of Khuasak on February 1, 1906.³⁵ The letter to his wife reads,

This has been a great day in the history of this mission. It means that Christ is marching on in the Chin Hills! Early in the morning, before it was yet day, we descended 4,000 feet to a small stream in the bottom of the valley where the stream had been dammed off for the purpose. I placed the disciples in a semi-circle around me after we had entered the water, and as the first rays of the sun came over the brow of the hills to the east of us, I baptized them in obedience to His commandment in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.³⁶

The first Christian church in the Chin Hills was found in Khuasak on February 17, 1906 with the eleven Siyin people: Pau Suan and wife, Kham Ciang; Thuam Hang and wife, Dim Khaw Cing; Lam Shwin and wife, Tum Lian and wife, Sou Tun; Toum Ting; and

³³ Johnson, 96.

³⁴ Johnson, 99.

³⁵ Johnson, 128.

³⁶ Johnson, 128.

Tau Neh.³⁷ In the words of Johnson, “this was the beginning of a movement that was to transform Chin society forever. It was the beginning of a far-reaching redemption that was to bring education, sobriety, faith, and hope to a whole people.”³⁸ The historic and dramatic picture of how Christianity would change the Chin society started to unfold.

Dr. East traveled to various rural areas in the Chin Hills. As a medical doctor, he graciously used his medical knowledge and skill in a way that always conditioned him to proclaim the Gospel to people in an effective and powerful manner. As Mrs. Carson notes, “he was large hearted, efficient, and sympathetic and was winning a large place in the hearts of the people.”³⁹ When he returned home to Hakha from his touring on April 6, 1909, Dr. East stated that he had traveled 600 miles, most of it on foot. He remarks,

During this trip I have treated, 1,644 patients suffering from all kinds of ailments and have given 300 second treatments, also extracted about 150 aching teeth that make that many people miserable. We have preached the Gospel from early morning to midnight every day and we have made our work known from Hakha to the border of Manipur and the Lushai Hills. We have sought to make Jesus known by word and deed, and we have used every ounce of energy to do it.⁴⁰

When he departed from Hakha on Oct. 3, 1910, Dr. East was seen off by a big crowd of people, many weeping like children, because he would not be able to come back due to his heart condition.⁴¹ In recognizing the invaluable works of Dr. East, Johnson writes,

Thus did he leave the Hills in which he had baptized the first Christian believers, established the first Christ church, and helped the first Christian denomination, the Chin Baptist Association. He was not the pioneer missionary—that was given to Arthur Carson and his wife Laura. But in the providence of God a Swedish

³⁷ Johnson, 130.

³⁸ Johnson, 130.

³⁹ Carson, *Pioneer Trails, Trials and Triumphs*, 179.

⁴⁰ Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 1, 231.

⁴¹ Johnson, 298.

immigrant to America became the man to have the high privileges mentioned above. His name will long be remembered, as long as the Chin church endures. May God be praised forever!⁴²

After having treatment in St. Paul, Minnesota, Dr. East felt that his health was improving and that he could perhaps return to Burma. But it is sad to say that he could no longer go back to Burma. In his letter to the mission offices in April, 1912, he expresses, “Our hearts are mostly there and the good news from the Hills makes us feel that our lives out there were not in vain; every district we visited is giving forth harvest. Praise the Lord!”⁴³

Joseph Herbert Cope and Elizabeth S. Cope

The Copes came to the Chin Hills as the third American Baptist Missionary couple to the Chin and arrived in Hakha in December of 1908. They were designated to Tiddim in the northern Chin Hills, but they had to stay in Hakha for some months because a mission house in Tiddim was still under construction.⁴⁴ Effective from October 1, 1909, the Chin mission was officially divided into a northern work to be centered at Tiddim directed by Herbert Cope and a southern work to be centered at Hakha of which Dr. East was in charge.⁴⁵ While they were staying in Hakha, Rev. Cope was deeply engaged in both evangelistic work and education in the area. When the Carsons arrived in Hakha in 1899, as already described, one of the first and most important things they did was to establish and run a school. Since then, the running of schools became a regular feature of the Christian program in the years to come. In the time of Rev. Cope, the

⁴² Johnson, 299-300.

⁴³ Johnson, 301.

⁴⁴ Johnson, 239.

⁴⁵ Johnson, 305.

mission schools were integrated into the government schools. He was given the position of the Honorary Inspector of Schools for the state while making himself available to become the author of many schoolbooks in several local languages.⁴⁶ Mr. Cope was an ordained minister, trained to be a preacher and committed to the work of evangelism and church growth. However, he was placed into a position of great responsibility in the Chin educational system, for the British government did not have their own man who could prepare textbooks for schools.⁴⁷ In November 1910, the Copes moved to Tiddim “to the delight of the Christians in that area who had waited so long for a mission family to take residence near them.”⁴⁸ The Copes then focused on the job of extending the kingdom of God in the hearts of the Siyins, Suktees, and Kamhaus in the Tiddim area, also known as the northern district of the Chin Hills.⁴⁹ In recognizing what Rev. Cope had done for the Chin in the area of cultivating and promoting education for the Chin, Johnson states,

In the light of what has transpired since the days of Cope, the Chins should rejoice that he did continue in his post until his untimely death in 1938, for without question it was the school system, taught in the main by Christian teachers and supervised by the missionary during those formative years, which enabled the people to throw off the chains of their ancestral religion and come into the light of education and that power that Cope talked about, a new life in Christ.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, it is necessary to note that Mrs. Cope always stood by her husband in all circumstances. Mrs. Cope “worked with the children and interested herself in young mothers with babies, giving them many a useful lesson, and in her quiet way ministering

⁴⁶ Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 2, 1084.

⁴⁷ Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 1, 501.

⁴⁸ Johnson, 313.

⁴⁹ Johnson.

⁵⁰ Johnson, 501.

to their needs and incidentally winning her way into every heart.”⁵¹ The work of the Copes comes to be recognized not just in the Tiddim area, but also in the whole Chin Hills. In November 1927, Rev. Cope was honored by the British government for his contributions to the country, particularly in the field of education for the Chins.⁵² Rev. Cope had toured many parts of the Chin Hills for preaching the Gospel to people in remote rural areas. When he arrived in Hakha from his tours on May 31, 1938, he was seriously ill and weak. It was a most unfortunate and sad event for the Chin that Dr. Cope met his untimely death in Hakha on June 11, 1938, at the age of 55.⁵³ In recognizing Dr. Cope’s priceless service and sacrifice for the Chin people, Dr. Chester Strait remarkably writes, “his work among the Chin tribes has affected every phase of their existence. He established and built churches, he administered to the spiritual needs of the people, teaching and preaching, and at all times was keenly interested in their health, economic life, and mental development, rendering continual service.”⁵⁴

John G. Woodin and Bessie L. Woodin

On October 11, 1909, the Mission Board appointed Dr. John G Woodin to be a medical missionary to the Chin to work along with Mrs. Carson and to continue the medical work of the Easts.⁵⁵ This is how Dr. Woodin and his wife John Woodin became the fourth missionary couple appointed by the American Baptist Missionary Union to

⁵¹ Carson, *Pioneer Trails, Trials and Triumphs*, 212.

⁵² Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 1, 495.

⁵³ Johnson, 596.

⁵⁴ Johnson, 602.

⁵⁵ Johnson, 240.

focus on the medical work.⁵⁶ Having arrived in Hakha on December 23, 1910, Bessie Woodin noted in her diary, “Mrs. Carson took us to school, hospital, and over the house, etc. The boys seem perfectly at home in her house. She is a mother to all and they love her. Their welcome is so genuine.”⁵⁷ It is interesting to look into how the Woodins took steps in carrying out their medical and evangelistic works for the Chin people.

After having worked among the Chin about over a year Dr. Woodin wrote to the Board to report that he and his wife were able to preach in the native dialect and that they had opened their home regularly to schoolchildren who had the ability and willingness to participate in Sunday school and to pray.⁵⁸ On the other hand, Dr. Woodin indicated that he had not been satisfied with the medical work being offered to the people. Based on his touring experience that allowed him to attend to many sick people in neighboring villages, Dr. Woodin pointed out that the numbers of people who came to the Haka hospital for medical service was low. The medical missionary claimed, “we cannot hope for large results from the hospital work yet, as the Chins are still afraid to be away from their villages when sick; but since we have the hospital it seems best to keep it open for the few patients we have.”⁵⁹ Despite such circumstances, Dr. Woodin continued on his medical work by reaching out to people in neighboring villages, which provided him with the opportunity to do the evangelistic work among them. As Johnson notes it, there were about 45 Christians when the Woodins arrived, but when they left Hakha the numbers of

⁵⁶ Johnson, 317.

⁵⁷ Johnson, 320.

⁵⁸ Johnson, 323.

⁵⁹ Johnson.

Christians increased to 204, for which Dr. Woodin gave credit to the faithful work of Karen and Chin preachers and to the schools for opening the eyes of young people.⁶⁰

By the end of 1914, Johnson writes, “John Woodin had personally been able to reach 66 villages for preaching, teaching, baptizing, and medical work.”⁶¹ Unfortunately, their time in the Chin Hills was short compared to that of other missionaries. In relation to the thought of why the Woodins worked briefly for the Chin, Sakhong asserts,

The Woodins left Chinram (Chinland) after only five years. The intriguing thing about the Woodins’ years in Haka is not what they did for the Chins but why they left Chinram so soon. There are two possible reasons: either John Woodin’s negative attitude toward the medical mission in Chinram, or Mrs Woodin’s poor health, perhaps the decisive factor.⁶²

Chester U. Strait and Florence T. Strait

The fifth missionary couple to serve in the Chin Hills were Rev. and Mrs. Chester U. Strait, who arrived in Hakha in April, 1926.⁶³ Among many things that they did for the Chin, the Straits are particularly known for their important role in establishing the Bible school, for their translation works, and for introducing new ideas on agriculture. After living in Hakha for about two months Strait expressed his impression about the Chin: “we have thus far been really favorably impressed with the Chin people. Many of them have character in their faces. They seem to respond to any little kindnesses show them These people are very honest and are rarely known to steal.”⁶⁴ Like their predecessors the

⁶⁰ Johnson, 327.

⁶¹ Johnson, 328.

⁶² Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 146.

⁶³ Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 1, 487.

⁶⁴ Johnson, 490.

Straits had to learn the language before other things. But language study did not prevent Mr. Strait from traveling to rural areas and doing Christian works in Hakha itself.⁶⁵

With the coming of the Straits, the previous plan for running the Bible school for the Chin came into fruition. This project was agreed at the Chin Hills Baptist Association meeting held in March, 1928. The establishment of the Bible school was intended to train pastors, preachers and leaders who would address the needs of the growing Christian population.⁶⁶ The first Bible school in the Chin Hills was opened on May 1, 1928, with 13 students: 4 from Tiddim, 4 from Falam, and 5 from Hakha areas. The intention of the missionaries was that those who studied for four years would be considered eligible applicants for becoming preachers.⁶⁷ It is also interesting to note that in addition to the biblical subjects, Chester Strait taught students other practical agricultural and medical knowledge like the raising of sheep, the cultivation of rice on ploughed farms, and the medical benefit of drinking milk, which had not been known to the Chin. Having finished their four-year course, the enrolled 13 Bible students graduated in the year 1931.⁶⁸

Mr. Strait believed that the task for changing the life of the Chin demanded both preaching the Gospel and giving new practical skills that could impact life in a substantial way. He was confident in saying that “while the Chins are very poor, yet they could be much better off if they knew how to utilize what they have.”⁶⁹ As he was doing tours in the villages, he spoke of the benefit of raising sheep and the uses for their wool. He

⁶⁵ Johnson.

⁶⁶ Johnson, 509.

⁶⁷ Johnson, 510.

⁶⁸ Johnson, 512.

⁶⁹ Johnson, 517.

taught people how to make soap on their own. Like he did in his Bible class, Mr. Strait always tried to introduce new seeds for people in rural areas, including tea and coffee, for producing sustainable agriculture, and a new system of growing rice on the river-bottom more productive than the typical slash-and-burn cultivation on the slopes.⁷⁰

In relation to developing Christian literature, Strait prepared the Sunday Bible School Lessons in Hakha Chin. Published in 1934 and released in 1935 for general use in the area these booklets satisfactorily met the need for the instruction of the believers, which became useful handbooks for the preachers, teachers, and village leaders.⁷¹ Strait's translation of the New Testament into the Hakha Chin (Lai dialet), which he worked through the help of the local Chin pastor Rev. Sang Ling, was published in 1940.⁷²

The Straits were witnessing the expansion of Christianity in many parts of the Chin Hills characterized by the increasing members of baptized believers and a remarkable sign of commitment shown by the pastors, preachers and elders. When the economic problems in America met the Mission Board with the difficulty of sending enough fund to their mission in the Chin Hills Mr. Strait was worried for sustaining the regular salaries for pastors and preachers. As a result, he decided to consult with them whether they would be willing to take rest for two months without pay. The pastors unanimously agreed to take less salary, but did not want to reduce their preaching works. Seeing the spirit of commitment and cooperation among Chin pastors and preachers, Mr. Strait was overjoyed, saying, "This is the spirit of the men with whom I am working."⁷³

⁷⁰ Johnson, 518-519.

⁷¹ Johnson, 568.

⁷² Johnson, 623.

⁷³ Johnson, 562.

When the Straits left Hakha in December 1940, they had the intention to come back. As Johnson notes it, Chester Strait was “very much interested in the progress of the Gospel among the Chins, and during the war he had a number of letters from Chins which told of the problems and trials they were enduring. This made him feel that perhaps he should return.”⁷⁴ But a serious automobile accident he and his wife suffered as well as other medical reasons no longer allowed them to return to the Chin Hills.⁷⁵

Franklin O. Nelson and Phidela O. Nelson

The sixth American Baptist missionary couple coming to the Chin Hills happened to be Franklin Nelson and his wife, Phileda. The Nelsons arrived in Tiddim in early December of 1939.⁷⁶ For continuing the works started by the deceased missionary Rev. Cope, they were placed in Tiddim, where they did touring, preaching, teaching, and pastoral work among people in their assigned area. When Mr. Nelson attended the meeting at Lumbang village in March, 1940, he saw that the total membership of churches in the Chin Hills had 5,539. A steady growth of the Christian population was seen in the Chin Hills, especially in the Tiddim and Hakha subdivisions.⁷⁷ The shape of the Chin Hills Baptist Association took a more mature position during the time of the Nelsons who helped improve fellowship and relation among Christians. By March 1941,

⁷⁴ Johnson, 645.

⁷⁵ Johnson, 646.

⁷⁶ Johnson, 632.

⁷⁷ Johnson, 635.

a membership of Chin churches topped 6,009. It is also significant to remark that the local contributions now made it possible for raising the salaries of low-paid workers.⁷⁸

As the Nelsons saw that it was important for providing a Bible study program to the Chin in a more effective way, they started a new program called the “Annual Bible Conference,” which usually happened in October and is still practiced today. Lasting for some days or weeks, the conference focused on giving a biblical study with the aim of helping pastors and lay Christians alike to understand the Bible and Christian faith and practice in a better way. The Nelsons used this opportunity to emphasize the role of deacons and pastors, giving instruction on the nature of the congregational polity of the Baptist churches that would require “the authority of chiefs and headmen to becoming willing to settle their problems in a more democratic way.”⁷⁹ Hence, the Nelsons saw the emergence of a more established form of Chin churches, which is more self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating.⁸⁰ In reporting how the Chin churches managed to grow over the years from 1899 to 1942, the year when the Nelsons returned to America for furlough, Johnson explains, “it can be said that the churches had been well prepared for the crisis; they were in a good financial situation; they were healthy and endowed with a leadership able to take full charge during the absence of the missionaries.”⁸¹

The Nelsons came back to the Chin Hills to resume their mission work among the Chin and safely reached Tiddim on May 2, 1946.⁸² After finishing their second term, they

⁷⁸ Johnson, 649.

⁷⁹ Johnson, 651.

⁸⁰ Johnson, 655.

⁸¹ Johnson, 659.

⁸² Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 2, 740.

returned to America for another furlough during 1952. As they prepared to come back their reentry visa was turned down by the Burmese government.⁸³ Even though church leaders in the Chin Hills had tried to speak to the authorities for the possibility of their return the latter just ignored the request because they had the policy to cut back on foreign religious persons.⁸⁴ It is a big loss for the Chin that the Nelsons no longer had the opportunity to come back to the Chin Hills for continuing their works among them.

Robert G. Johnson and Elizabeth L. Johnson

It was Robert G. Johnson and Elizabeth L. Johnson who came as the seventh and last American Baptist missionary couple to the Chin in Burma. They arrived in Tiddim on May 30, 1946, where they lived for almost half a year. They were staying with the Nelsons, who gave them a good orientation to the work in the Chin Hills.⁸⁵ They arrived in Hakha on February 5, 1947. In describing how they had felt being welcomed to Hakha, Johnson writes, “we cannot tell you adequately how we felt to see their joy at the arrival of missionaries after five war years without them. These were profoundly moving days as at last we reached the village and the people where our gracious God had provided us a home and a ministry.”⁸⁶ The Johnsons were now settled in Hakha, where they took care of the growing Christian population while being committed to touring the rural areas. As they were anxious for having the ability to use the Hakha dialect at a more advanced level, they had to study it more extensively and passed their first language examination

⁸³ Johnson, 957.

⁸⁴ Johnson, 1010.

⁸⁵ Johnson, 763.

⁸⁶ Johnson, 793.

on March 3, 1948.⁸⁷ Johnson was able to preach in the Hakha Chin language on Easter Sunday in 1948, within less than two years of their arrival. He said, “I had planned to write the sermon in advance and actually did get two pages down on paper, but then I ran out of time. So in church I had to speak without text or notes, quite a test for my first attempt.”⁸⁸ Their language ability allowed the Johnsons to work effectively for the Chin.

In response to the needs of Christians the Johnsons started a new program called “The Seven-Weeks Bible Study Program.” This program was intended for church deacons and other leaders in the villages who wanted to know more about how to conduct worship services and run their churches well.⁸⁹ The coming of the Johnsons to Hakha was particularly meaningful for the Chin because they were committed to the reestablishment of the Bible school and its continued running. After the first Bible school had been established in Hakha from 1927 to 1931 through the leadership of the Straits, the growing need of the church demanded that two Bible schools should be run in the Chin Hills: one in Tiddim to be managed by the Nelsons in 1947, and another in Hakha by the Johnsons in 1948.⁹⁰ On the matter of the establishment of the Hakha school Johnson reports,

In consultation with the Haka area preachers we agreed to start our school in Haka in June, 1948, keeping to a limit of 30 students, using Haka Chin as our medium of instruction and running for about 5 months, June through October, for 3 years. We had to accept more students and shorten our school year, but we did manage to continue for the 3 years.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Johnson, 841.

⁸⁸ Johnson, 843.

⁸⁹ Johnson, 983.

⁹⁰ Johnson, 845.

⁹¹ Johnson, 845.

The Johnsons were committed to managing and teaching at the Bible school even in the face of real financial difficulties, for this was how they could best help the church to grow. Johnson claims, “we were determined to run our school by faith also, knowing that this was the key to evangelism and church growth in Chinland.”⁹² Due to the Johnsons’ sacrificial efforts, the 32 male students in Hakha Bible school graduated on October 1, 1950.⁹³ Among these 32 graduates the stories of those men like Hai Mang, Ni Vung, Za Ling, Chan Thang, Heng Cin, That Dun, Hrang Mang, and Pa Hrek are known to the Chin today as pastors who passionately preached the Gospel and faithfully served the Christian community in their respective places. Having returned to the Chin Hills in 1953 for their second term, the Johnsons continued on their work at the Bible school in Hakha until 1958. The local persons who helped the Johnsons at the Bible school were Rev. Van Lo, Saya Lal Hnin, Kam Khaw Thang, David Van Bik, James Sang Awi, and Antony Ngun Uk. Relinquishing the Bible school to focus on other works, Johnson says, “it was a rich experience to help train the men and women who some day would become the pastors and leaders of our Chin Baptist churches, and we thank God for this.”⁹⁴

One of the most important services the Johnsons rendered in furthering the development of Chin Christianity was that they took the responsibility for translating the Bible into the Hakha Chin language. The completed Hakha Chin was published by the United Bible Societies in 1978.⁹⁵ While David Van Bik worked as the chief translator of the Hakha Chin Bible Robert Johnson acted as the translation helper. Johnson reports,

⁹² Johnson, 852.

⁹³ Johnson, 909.

⁹⁴ Johnson, 1038.

⁹⁵ Johnson, 1265.

Our task was to do the original translation into the Haka Chin Language. Van Bik was definitely the chief translator and I his helper. I was more than a scribe, merely writing down his words. We discussed and debated, and often I, as a native speaker of English, could clarify the meaning of the text. Our standard text was the Revised Standard Version, and we had many other versions in English, Lushai, and Burmese as supplements.⁹⁶

The Johnsons witnessed the increasing numbers of churches in the Chin Hills.

Local Chin pastors and leaders of the churches now saw the need for having a greater Christian unity and fellowship for the greater service and influence of the church in the whole Chin Hills. That is how the Chin Baptist Convention came into existence in 1953. The convention consisted of three local associations known as the Tiddim, Falam, and Hakha Baptist Associations.⁹⁷ Among many things, the Chin Baptist Convention was committed to the usual purposes of friendship, evangelism and fostering education.⁹⁸

The Johnsons were fully engaged in strengthening the newly formed Convention while being committed to empowering local churches. However, they were brought to a different political situation in Burma after the coup staged by General Ne Win in 1962. With the coming of the anti-western and anti-missionary motive the Johnsons saw limitations imposed on and threats targeted at their works. Their determination to stand in solidarity with people whose properties nationalized by the Burmese government was interpreted by local authorities as a cause for possible crime. Robert Johnson was now suspected of working against or teaching in opposition to the government policy.⁹⁹ Most regrettably, the long era of the American Baptist Mission to the Chin Hills came to an

⁹⁶ Johnson, 1263.

⁹⁷ Johnson, 999-1000.

⁹⁸ Johnson, 1001.

⁹⁹ Johnson, 1213.

end when Robert Johnson, the last missionary to the Chin, left Hakha on April 28, 1966, due to the government's policy to expel all foreign missionaries.¹⁰⁰ Having served in the Chin Hills for 13 years in all, Johnson recounts numerous services they gave to the Chin:

From 1953 when we returned until 1966 when we left, there were no other American missionaries working with us in the Chin Hills. We along were responsible to our mission for everything: church planting and nurture, evangelism, fostering the associations and the convention, Sunday school work, the Bible School, literature production, Bible translation, women's work, education, medical, and agricultural work to some extent, writing constitutions, and representing the ZBC at the mission headquarters. All of this was for an area of more than 13,000 square miles, most of it reachable only on foot.¹⁰¹

The long history of the American Baptist Chin Mission was finally concluded with the expulsion of the Johnsons from the Chin Hills. The existence and growth of Chin Christianity in history rests on the love, commitment and sacrifice of all the seven American Baptist missionary couples. Meanwhile, it is necessary to remember those Karen missionaries who faithfully stood and worked alongside the American missionaries in the work of evangelization and education for the Chin. There were altogether 15 Karen evangelists and teachers who were working with those American Baptist missionaries in spreading the Gospel and promoting education among the Chin.¹⁰² In recognition of their great service Dr. Cope expressed his deepest appreciation to the Karen missionaries:

We owe everything to the Karens. We do not know what we would do without them. When Mr. Carson first came up he brought three or four Karens with him and from that time on, with a few exceptions, they have proven splendid men on whom one could place no end of responsibility. For a long time they were the only evangelists here. They went out to strange villages where on preparations had been made for them and where they were threatened direly. The first Chin Christians came seven days' journey from Haka where a Henzada Karen, Thra

¹⁰⁰ Johnson, 1278.

¹⁰¹ Johnson, 1011.

¹⁰² Zomi Theological College, *Chin Church History* (Falam: Zomi Theological College, 2012), 77.

Shwe Zan, worked alone, seeing the missionaries only once a year. The Chin preachers were put under these Karens and some of our finest workers were trained by them. They learned the language, learned the ways of the people, and won their confidence. In the first literary work I did, it was the Karens who helped me. In the school work as well we have Karen Headmasters, and they proved as valuable there as in the evangelistic work.¹⁰³

The long commitment of American missionaries, who were assisted by the Karen evangelists and teachers, led to the transformation of the spiritual, social, and cultural life of the Chin. Johnson rightly expresses, “We Baptist missionaries stood for education, progress, cleanliness, prosperity, sobriety, and they respected us and our fellow Christian workers for it even if they did not respond easily to the spiritual values for which we stood.”¹⁰⁴ All the American Baptist missionaries will be forever remembered in the history of Chin Christianity for their love, sacrifice, and commitment for the Chin. This is the living testimony of how the Chin people have acquired and experienced Christianity in their individual and communal lives. A more complete view of how Christianity has continued to shape the life of the Chin will be visible in the responses offered by Chin scholars and theologians to whom we turn our attention now.

The all-conquering approach of mission that American Baptist missionaries applied in their works for the Chin, Sakhong argues, aimed at changing their social structure, transforming their worldview, and converting their religious and ritual systems.¹⁰⁵ Evaluating how these missionaries engaged the Chin culture in general, Ross asserts, “the missionaries’ view of culture was very different and they associated Chin culture and primal religion with pagan idolatry, which led them to indiscriminately

¹⁰³ Maung Shwe Wa, *Burma Baptist Chronicle*, edited by Genevieve Sowards and Erville Sowards (Rangoon: Burma Baptist Convention, 1963), 388.

¹⁰⁴ Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 2, 919.

¹⁰⁵ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 121.

prohibit traditional practices.”¹⁰⁶ In this regard, Samuel Ngun Ling remarks, “It is important that the missionaries changed some elements of the primitive ethnic cultures, which they thought had a negative impact on the life of people.”¹⁰⁷ With respect to the matter of whether the dowry should be discontinued or not, Rev. Cope, for instance, refrained from becoming a legislator for the church. But he wanted the pastors and the people to decide the matter based on their own thinking and their reading of the Bible.¹⁰⁸ In relation to the drinking of alcohol, which became a destructive moral habit in the traditional Chin society, Johnson claims that “the missionaries took a strong stand against drink, and admission to the Christian churches was contingent upon total abstinence.”¹⁰⁹ This, therefore, testifies that the missionaries chose to hold a clear position on preventing the Chin from continuing on what they described as destructive cultural elements while simultaneously refraining from being too much judgmental.

Generally speaking, the adoption and practice of Christianity stands as the transforming basis in the life of the Chin society. Their abandonment of their tribal religion based on their embracing of Christianity ended their primitive way of social life, marking a historic change in the Chin Hills forever.¹¹⁰ The encounter with Christianity has fundamentally transformed the social, educational, and religious life of the Chin.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Ross, “Development of Local Theology of the Chin (Zomi) of the Assemblies of God (AG),” 244.

¹⁰⁷ Samuel Ngun Ling, *The Meeting of Christianity and Buddhism in Burma: Its Past, Present, and Future Perspectives* (Yangon: Ling’s Family Publication, 2017), 193.

¹⁰⁸ Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 1, 546.

¹⁰⁹ Johnson, 520.

¹¹⁰ Mang, “Christianity and Ethnic Identity in Burma,” 98.

¹¹¹ Mang, “A Chin History of the Encounter with British Colonial Rule and the American Baptist Mission Works in the Chin Hills,” 26.

As already known, the missionaries applied what used to be called the “holistic approach of mission,” which emphasized both evangelization and the social development of the people to whom they proclaimed the Gospel.¹¹² They presented the Gospel in terms of its holistic and organic parts: evangelism, education, health, agriculture, administration, and other social enterprises.¹¹³ Their educational mission proved to be the most effective instrument for evangelization of the Chin people. The mission schools became the centers for conversion to Christianity.¹¹⁴ The foundation of education laid by missionaries has “enlightened the Chins, fired their imagination and fed flames of their thought.”¹¹⁵ By breaking down the old society and tribal barriers, the Gospel allowed the Chin to gain a fresh self-awareness of national identity created by their new Christian religion.¹¹⁶ Their embracing of the Gospel provided them with a modern civilization they had never known before.¹¹⁷ The role of Christianity is thus seen as changing human life in a holistic way.

Therefore, it is undeniable that their adoption of Christianity gave the Chin a new religious and national consciousness that would forever change the whole sphere of their cultural and sociopolitical worldview. Now, we will turn to how Christianity continued to shape and build up the Chin following the missionary period. Particularly, we will explore how the Chin advanced their Christian mission in other places while construing

¹¹² Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 150.

¹¹³ Zomi Theological College, *Chin Church History*, iv.

¹¹⁴ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 140.

¹¹⁵ Thlaawr Bawihrin, *The Impact of Missionary Christianity on the Chins* (Indianapolis, IN: Published by the author, 2002), 144.

¹¹⁶ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 174.

¹¹⁷ Bawihrin, *The Impact of Missionary Christianity on the Chins*, 131.

Christianity as a preserving source of their new identity, which in turn sustained them for living as distinct ethnic religious people in the midst of Burmese nationalist politics.

Chin Christianity in the Post-Missionary Era

The history of Chin Christianity after 1966 was totally different from the time of the missionaries. This was when Chin pastors and church leaders started to find themselves in a situation in which they were confronted with new challenges, as they no longer had the American missionaries with them. Looking at the period between 1966 to 1988, during which the Chin Baptist churches for the first time learned how to grow without the missionary direction, the outgoing missionary Johnson expresses that the Chin Christians had prospered and grown and were fully self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating.¹¹⁸ There was a period of tranquility with regard to the works of Christian mission from 1962 to 1988.¹¹⁹ However, the journey taken by the Chin churches after 1966 was never smooth or easy. The Revolutionary Council of Burma ordered all foreigners and missionaries to leave the country in that year. Karen scholar Saw Augurlion points out, “the departure of foreign missionaries left the churches with leadership problems and the nationalization of mission schools and hospitals diminished the role of Christianity in civil society.”¹²⁰ The changing political landscape in Burma now came to meet Christian churches with real challenges and crises as the military rule led by New Win attempted to limit the growth of Christianity in all forms.

¹¹⁸ Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 2, 1297.

¹¹⁹ Zomi Theological College, *Chin Church History*, 151.

¹²⁰ Saw Augurlion, *Christian Existence: And Issues Related to Nationalism and Religious Identity in Post-Colonial Myanmar* (Yangon: Published by Judson Research Center, Myanmar Institute of Theology, 2017), 245.

However, the remarkable strength of Chin Baptist churches in the midst of those challenging circumstances was that they always tried to do what they could for advancing the Gospel in other places and for strengthening Christianity in a way that reflected the missionaries' examples. The passion for bringing the Gospel to other parts of Chin State was already alive in the hearts of native Chin pastors since the early time. Rev. That Dun and Rev. Pa Hrek from northern Chin State were sent to the Matu area in the south in 1944, who evangelized their fellow Chin in that area.¹²¹ It was reported that they had been able to convert about 700 Matu people to the Christian faith. Six of them attended the Bible school in Hakha, who became the first fruits of the Matu area.¹²² In taking further steps to evangelize other parts of the Chin state, which had not been reached out by American Baptist missionaries, Chin Baptist Convention extended its outreach mission by forming a new movement called "Chin for Christ in One Century" (CCOC), which was consecrated during the Convention's Triennial meeting held in Thantling on April 3, 1983.¹²³ Adopting as its theme "Jesus is Lord," drawn from Phil. 2:11, the main aims and objectives of CCOC included: (1) to preach the Word of God to all the Chins before 100th anniversary of the arrival of the Gospel, (2) to revive and strengthen the existing churches, and (3) to evangelize the non-Chins with renewed energy after the centennial anniversary of the Baptist Mission in the Chin State.¹²⁴ Many Chin Christians donated funds for this mission project while many pastors and laypersons committed their lives as ambassadors for Christ for preaching the Gospel in all parts of the Chin State.

¹²¹ Wa, *Burma Baptist Chronicle*, 392.

¹²² Robert G. Johnson, *On the Back Road to Mandalay* (Longwood: Xulon Press, 2007), 186.

¹²³ Hrin, *The Impact of Missionary Christianity on the Chins*, 155.

¹²⁴ Hrin, 157.

Concluded on March 15, 1999, in Hakha where the 100th anniversary of Chin Christianity was celebrated, it was reported that the evangelistic enterprise of CCOC had been faithfully carried out by 1849 dedicated ambassadors, resulting in the harvesting of 20,051 new converts, who accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord and the birth of 60 new churches across Chin State.¹²⁵ By changing CCOC to the Centenary Mission for Christ (CMC) in 2000, the Chin Baptist Convention stepped in to launch diaspora mission beyond the border of the Chin State. Taking as its primary goal to proclaim the Gospel to those who had not yet believed in Jesus Christ, the movement of CMC truly focused on enabling new converts to experience the social, economic, and educational development as well.¹²⁶ Many churches and associations are now doing their missions in various parts of the country. The focus on uplifting the life of people by rendering education and other social services still largely remains at the core value of the Chin Christian mission as it continues to follow the strategies of American missionaries.

On the other hand, the constructive role of Christianity in the Chin society is strikingly remarkable when it comes to the idea of the formation of Chin identity and national unity. The fact of the matter is that the Burmese military regime never supported the prevalence of unity and cooperation among the Chin. According to Ling,

This Burmese nationalist ideology has continued to dominate the country's post-independence political leaders. The process of cultural assimilation became a predominantly social and political threat to the existence and growth of the minority Christian churches. A crucial problem for the minority ethnic Christians is not the use of Burmese as the common language, but the government's attempt to eliminate the languages of minority ethnic groups. In response to this

¹²⁵ Zomi Theological College, *Chin Church History*, 269.

¹²⁶ Zomi Theological College, 277.

challenge, minority Christian churches are determined to focus on community building in order to preserve their ethnic selfhood and cultural identity.¹²⁷

In this regard, it is interesting to see how the Chin came to perceive and use Christianity as a means for seeking unity in the midst of their diversity. Viewing Christianity as a creative source for the new identity of the Chin, Sakhong contends that “Christianity provided a means of promoting self-awareness through its ideology and ecclesiastical structures.”¹²⁸ From the beginning, the substantial role Christianity has played in seeking to form unity among the Chin marked by a new national consciousness has been always vital and essential. The Chin Hills Baptist Association (CHBA) was formed in March, 1907, which echoed the Baptist polity entailing an “association” that brings together Baptist churches into an organization for fellowship.¹²⁹ Throughout later generations, the existence of CHBA provided a single ecclesiastical structure for the Chin who changed from “a tribal and clan-oriented society to a community of faith in Jesus Christ.”¹³⁰ The emergence of CHBA led to “the making of their national identity and political consciousness.”¹³¹ As already indicated, it was with the vision for building a larger Christian unity among the Chin that the Chin Baptist Convention was established at Saikah village, Thantlang township, in 1953.¹³² Consisting of more than 30 associations and many churches across Myanmar, CBC has united all Chin Baptists in witnessing the

¹²⁷ Samuel Ngun Ling, “Revisiting Baptist Ecclesiology in the Context of Myanmar,” *One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church: Some Lutheran and Ecumenical Perspectives*, edited by Hans-Peter Grosshans (Minneapolis: Lutheran University Press, 2009), 117.

¹²⁸ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 235.

¹²⁹ Johnson, *History of the American Baptist Chin Mission*, Vol. 1, 145.

¹³⁰ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 142.

¹³¹ Mang, “Christianity and Ethnic Identity in Burma,” 99-100.

¹³² Zomi Theological College, *Chin Church History*, 93.

Gospel within and beyond Chin State. In proclaiming the Gospel among the Buddhists and strengthening the Christian faith among the Chin, the Convention has advanced its ministry through the channels of its established departments, namely, youth, women, mission and evangelism, Christian social service and development, Christian education, and theological education.¹³³ Its theological institution named Chin Christian Institute of Theology, which is located in Falam and known as the oldest in Chin State, has produced many faithful pastors, missionaries, and leaders for the church. Thus, CBC becomes the most important Christian organization that brings the Chin together in the spirit of oneness in Christ in assembling their resources together for doing their Christian mission and keeping their Christian faith and identity in the majority Burmese Buddhist context.

As it became increasingly apparent that Chin churches needed to do more for their survival in the face of the Burmese nationalism, which had been suppressing the religion, cultures, and languages of ethnic minorities in Burma, Chin Baptist leaders and pastors in Hakha and Thantlang areas formed a new religious organization with the intention for preserving their culture, religion and language (Lai). The new Christian organization was named “Chin Christian Literature Society” when it was officially started on December 12, 1987.¹³⁴ After six years of its birth, the name of the organization was changed to “Chin Association for Christian Communication” (CACC) in 1994, which was fully engaged in preserving the Chin culture, publishing literature on religious and other subjects, and enabling the learning of the Chin (Lai) dialect for children at schools. Based in Hakha, the capital of Chin State and joined by 16 Baptist Associations in the region, 5

¹³³ Zomi Theological College, 104-07.

¹³⁴ Chin Christian University, *A History of Chin Christian University (Chin Christian University Tuanbia)* (Hakha: Chin Christian University, 2020), 28.

local Baptist churches, 3 other denominations, and diaspora Chin churches across the globe, CACC has united the Chin (Lai tribe) in maintaining their cultural identity, developing their language, translating and collecting Christian Bible, hymns, and religious books, and preparing literatures on Christian education for children.¹³⁵ In addition, CACC was committed to advancing theological education for the Chin community by establishing a Bible school in Hakha in 1990, which is named today Chin Christian University.¹³⁶ Adopting “Education for Abundant Life” as its motto, the University is committed to providing theology and liberal arts education to the Chin by offering three different programs, namely, Theology, English, and Business.¹³⁷ The role of theological institutions is crucial and transformational for the Chin, because they not only aim at enhancing spiritual and ethnical formation of theological students, but also they strive for helping them to know the responsibility for protecting and promoting their Chin culture, literature, and languages indispensable to their national identity.¹³⁸

In short, the Chin people have perceived Christianity as the source of their ethnic identity and their national survival in the face of Burmese nationalism. With more than 90 percent of the Chin registered as Christians today, the ethnic identity of the Chin is deeply grounded into Christianity.¹³⁹ Their adoption of Christianity truly “provided the Chin people a means of preserving their national identity and promoting their interests in

¹³⁵ Chin Christian University, 29.

¹³⁶ Chin Christian University, 19.

¹³⁷ Chin Christian University, 25.

¹³⁸ Mang, “Christianity and Ethnic Identity in Burma,” 104.

¹³⁹ Mang, 103.

the face of powerful forces of change.”¹⁴⁰ As Augurlion asserts, “Most Burmese people describe themselves as Buddhists. Most ethnic peoples such as the Karens, Kachins and Chin would describe themselves as Christians because Christianity is a religion by which they can protect and maintain their identities under the threat of Burmese Buddhist nationalism.”¹⁴¹ Their adoption of Christianity prepares them to deny authoritarianism in all aspects of their societal life, for “the Baptist polity of local autonomy, negotiation, and the democratic way of life functioned well in Chin Baptist society.”¹⁴² As Pum Za Mang puts it, “Chin ethnic identity and Christianity have effectively become synonymous, and in the eyes of a typical Chin, Christianity is essentially part and parcel of his or her ethnic identity.”¹⁴³ The affirming of Christianity as the formative source of the Chin national identity declares that their religious, cultural and sociopolitical survival as minority ethnic people within the context of Burmese Buddhist nationalism has been fundamentally underscored and determined by their connection with Christianity.

Struggle for Freedom and Its Theological Support

As already described in the previous chapter, the political landscape of Myanmar was set to embrace its worst scenario in history when a military coup was staged on the morning of February 1, 2021. The whole picture of how the Chin responded to the coup testifies that Chin Christianity is, at least, involved in the sociopolitical concerns and struggles of the people. Knowing that the coup was basically meant to further Burmese

¹⁴⁰ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 244.

¹⁴¹ Augurlion, *Christian Existence*, 210.

¹⁴² Mang, “A Chin History of the Encounter with British Colonial Rule and the American Baptist Mission Works in the Chin Hills,” 228.

¹⁴³ Mang, “Christianity and Ethnic Identity in Burma,” 103.

nationalism for prolonging its domination over all people in Myanmar, Chin Christians, like other peoples across the country, have decided to resist it at all costs. In this cause, many people have been arrested or killed by the authorities. Tens of thousands have been displaced and become refugees. The worst case of Myanmar Army's brutality in suppressing the democratic aspirations of the Chin was visible when it demolished a Chin Christian town located in the northern Chin state close to the border with India.

People of the Thantlang town came together in protesting against the 2021 military coup. This public protest was organized and led by university graduates and students, who were convinced of the connection between Christianity and the vision for sociopolitical freedom. As they came to be aware that the act of peaceful protest across the country was no longer effective in influencing the military authorities to revert the coup, young people in Thantlang and those living in the township area, in collaboration with other young people from different parts of Chin State, resorted to taking arms and formed a local militia called "Chinland Defense Forces," which was determined to fight for the restoration of democracy and freedom. The emergence of CDF reflects the aspirations of the Chin, who have been endlessly struggling for freedom, human rights, and federal democracy. Unfortunately, the Myanmar military's response to the activities of Thantlang CDF became more brutal and deadlier. In trying to put the movement of CDF under control, on September 18, 2021, the cruel military burnt down more than 15 houses in Thantlang town where there lived over 10,000 civilians. A young Baptist Pastor Cung Biak Hum, who had headed to the burning scenes for rescue work, was brutally shot dead by the military. Instead of keeping the intensifying situation calm, safe, or peaceful, the military continued to frighten the local people in all forms. As the

environment became more militarized and was no longer safe to live, the people fled for their lives and were relocated in various parts of the country and beyond. Many crossed the border with India, where they now live as refugees. Lacking compassion, mercy, and love for humanity, the military conducted its most shameful brutality by burning down the town, destroying over 1340 houses out of 1800, including 15 churches.¹⁴⁴ Thantlang has now become a deserted town, with no civilian inhabitants.

The case of Thantlang town truly speaks of how the Chin people as a whole see themselves under the military dictatorship. Clearly, the destruction of the town reminds us of the shaking encounter between Christianity and Burmese nationalist hegemony in recent time. The fact that the town has been destroyed in response to the determination of its people in opposing military dictatorship tells the truth that their view of freedom and democracy has been underscored by their Christian faith by which they come to choose and value freedom, liberty, and democracy over authoritarian military rule. Looking at how the Chin respond to the 2021 military coup in general, we realize how Christianity remains as a major guiding principle in condemning the emergence of the coup, which is interpreted as the modern manifestation of Burmese nationalism. Looking back to the public protest in Hakha, the capital of Chin State, which lasted for weeks in February of 2021, it was pastors, university and seminary students, politicians, and young people who led and organized the movement, who held that it was the time for the Chin people to stand and fight together for the restoration of freedom, liberation, and democracy. Having joined street protests priests and pastors declared on 10 February that they utterly rejected military rule, called upon the military leaders to free all detainees, urged security forces

¹⁴⁴ I received this information from Pastor Ca Cung Bik of Johnson Memorial Baptist Church, Thantlang on January 11, 2023. The pastor and his family currently live in Hakha, Chin State.

not to harm protesters, and demanded a federal democracy.¹⁴⁵ In this way, they gave speeches to protesters on Christian responsibility towards freedom and democracy, and prayed with them on the ground. Meanwhile, Christians from all denominations came together and held regular prayer meetings on every Friday morning for months. The pastors insisted that all Christians should participate in the struggle for freedom and democracy through protests, prayers, or financial support. Grounding their sociopolitical views in their faith in God, many Chin Christians expressed that they should resist the military rule and struggle for the restoration of freedom, liberation, and democracy, demonstrating that Christianity is inseparable for the sociopolitical world. Diaspora Chin communities around the world have responded to the coup in many forms. They vowed to give continued supports to this struggle for the restoration of freedom and democracy. Giving a large amount of funds to this cause, the leaders of the Chin Baptist Churches USA stressed that the Chin people, who live abroad, should be involved in the common struggle for freedom and democracy in their motherland. What is more, Chin Baptist leaders in the USA made a vital contribution to the efforts of calling for the US congress to help the Burmese, who have struggled for democracy.¹⁴⁶ Clearly, the Chin Christians' response to sociopolitical issues has been inspired by their connection with Christianity that gives them the taste of freedom and tells them why they should struggle for freedom.

The important thing to reconsider now is how the struggle for freedom might be better encouraged through a sound theological understanding. It is relevant to state that

¹⁴⁵ Iselin Frydenlund, Pum Za Mang, Phyo Wai and Susan Hayward, "Religious Responses to the Military Coup in Myanmar," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* 19, no. 3 (2021): 83-84.

¹⁴⁶ Pum Za Mang, "Chin Diaspora Christianity in the United States," *Theology Today* 80, no. 2 (2023): 181.

the concept of freedom has been in existence in Chin Christianity from the beginning, for it was introduced and cultivated by the missionaries as a source of transformation and liberation from the uncivilized culture and oppressive social structures. Nevertheless, the tendency to ignore the Christian participation in the sociopolitical world has been now widely prevalent among the Chin, especially the evangelical Christians. Needless to say, the negligence of Christian role for the sociopolitical environment is not the case with the missionary Christianity, which was committed to improving human life in its totality.

Admittedly speaking, the unfolding history of Chin Christianity has been well characterized with denominational splits preceded by doctrinal differences or other factors. With the Baptist denomination considered as the mainline church, the total number of Chin denominations tops around 40, implying that there exist real theological divergences within Chin Christianity.¹⁴⁷ The two theological trends characterizing Chin Christianity today are ecumenical theology and evangelical theology. The ecumenical theology, which is considered as the position of Baptist churches and some other mainline churches, explicitly engages sociopolitical and cultural issues while being committed to the promotion of the Christian faith in a conventional sense.¹⁴⁸ Ecumenical theology has been taught and promoted in several theological schools in Myanmar. According to Ling, “the church’s mission should reach the oppressed and marginalized, challenge the rich and those who exploit or oppress, and free people from their bondage into a new life in Christ.”¹⁴⁹ In analyzing how ecumenical theology has influenced

¹⁴⁷ Zomi Theological College, *Chin Church History*, 195-202.

¹⁴⁸ Laism, “Naming God in Burma Today,” 77.

¹⁴⁹ Ling, “Revisiting Baptist Ecclesiology in the Context of Myanmar,” 127.

churches in Myanmar, Laisum writes, “theology has become the preaching of social, political, and religious ideals in the name of Jesus instead of analyzing and interpreting them anew in the light of biblical faith.”¹⁵⁰ However, many Chin Christians, who identify themselves as evangelical Christians, have viewed the social and political situation very differently than did ecumenical theologians.¹⁵¹ Evangelical churches are seen to be powerful in attracting people to join church, for they prioritize the preaching of the Gospel in the church while simultaneously relaxing the rule of worship in which worshippers have more freedom and flexibility.¹⁵² Evangelical Christians are particularly active in the evangelistic work with the motive of preserving and propagating the Christian faith.¹⁵³ They are admired for showing real enthusiasm in worship, prayer, singing, and for their eagerness to read the Bible and listen to the Word of God. Being focused on the spreading of the Gospel, the salvation of souls, and the changing of human life through the Gospel, the evangelical Christians are prone to criticizing other denominations as being liberal, thereby holding a denominational superiority complex which hinders the process of Christian holistic mission.¹⁵⁴ Their sermons, songs, and prayers are directed to the call for Christians to focus on their spiritual salvation in the future rather than paying attention to what they should do in the present time. The evangelical Christians appear to be future-oriented believers who are solely interested in the life-after-death salvation. Realizing that this evangelical theology has failed to pay

¹⁵⁰ Ling.

¹⁵¹ Laisum, “Naming God in Burma Today,” 84.

¹⁵² Zomi Theological College, *Chin Church History*, 175-76.

¹⁵³ Augurlion, *Christian Existence*, 246.

¹⁵⁴ Laisum, “Naming God in Burma Today,” 84-91.

attention to the matter of sociopolitical issues, Bik says, “unless a theology dirties its hands in the sufferings, struggles, and aspirations of the people it is meant to be serving, that theology becomes unapplied and dead theology.”¹⁵⁵ In response to the inadequacy of the evangelical theology, Ling also contends that we need a new method of theologizing that aims to liberate the poor and the oppressed and to empower them in the fight for justice, dignities, rights, and freedom.¹⁵⁶ A more detailed observation on how evangelicalism and ecumenism actually characterizes the theological shape of Chin Christianity will be offered in chapter 6.

The divergence between ecumenical theology and evangelical theology with regard to sociopolitical issues is remarkable and deep. The challenge to Chin Christianity today is to envision how the Chin Christians might acquire a new understanding of the triune God, which will, in turn, help them to discern that our relationship with the triune God is the inner spiritual source promoting us to live responsibly for our sociopolitical world. The necessity for reconsidering the doctrine of the Trinity is undeniable. The problem, however, is that many Chin Christians are not well aware of how freedom relates to the Trinity or how our perception of freedom has been enhanced by our understanding of the Trinity. Their Trinitarian misconception prevents them from knowing how the triune God relates to them and shapes them to live a meaningful life for the society. As described in chapter 1, the Chin Christians have gone too far in separating

¹⁵⁵ Edmund Za Bik, “The Challenge to Reformed Theology: A Perspective from Myanmar,” *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, edited by David Willis and Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 85.

¹⁵⁶ Samuel Ngun Ling, “Ethnicity, Religion and Theology in Asia: An Exploration from the Myanmar Context,” *Ethnicity, Religion and Theology: A Consultation on Ethnic Minorities in the Mekong Region*, edited by Hanns Hoerschelmann (Hong Kong: Lutheran Theological Seminary/Taosheng Publishing House, 2007), 18.

the being and act of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. This tendency leads them to ignore how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit encounter humanity as one undivided God as well as how this experience turns out to be a transforming and liberating source for humanity. As it will be discussed in chapter 6 in more detail, the prospect of seeking a new Trinitarian theology in Chin Christianity, which is characterized with Trinitarian misconceptions, require us to reinterpret the doctrine of the Trinity for knowing how Trinity intersects humanity as well as how humanity acquires freedom, which enables it to live positively for the world.

Summary

The Chin will always be indebted to American Baptist missionaries who brought the Gospel, which changes the whole sphere of their religious, cultural, and social life. Christianity has provided them with a new world-view and value system, which would equip them to cope with emerging challenges and change thrust upon them.¹⁵⁷ Christianity will always be noted for its major role in the social advancement, cultural change, political awakening, and the making of ethnic identity of the Chin.¹⁵⁸ In modernizing the traditional Chin society and moving the Chin to acquire a new civilization, Christianity has effectively shaped their sociopolitical view as they are endlessly struggling under the Burmese military rule. Therefore, the understanding of how American Baptist missionaries introduced and cultivated Christianity as a transforming religion and how Chin Baptist leaders embraced it as the gird of their identity in the face of Burmese nationalist politics now stands as the important historical

¹⁵⁷ Sakhong, *In Search of Chin Identity*, 244.

¹⁵⁸ Mang, "Christianity and Ethnic Identity in Burma," 80.

knowledge and lesson on how the Chin Christians today might interpret and advance the implication of Christianity in their ongoing engagement with the sociopolitical world. Nevertheless, the prospect of envisioning how Chin Christianity today might play a more effective role in its sociopolitical context indicates that we need to have a new concept of the Trinity, which tells us of how the triune God encounters humanity and how that experience reshapes humanity in the matter of its engagement with the social world.

Moving into this direction, we will take the responsibility for studying how Barth defines the doctrine of the Trinity, particularly how he speaks of the nature and work of the triune God based on the knowledge of God's revelation into human history. But, it is necessary for us to study his life and work at the first step, which will lead us to the view that it is his perception of the Gospel that powerfully moves him to advocate for the liberating and transformative nature of Christianity in response to the religious, economic, and sociopolitical issues in his days. While his example comes to serve as a relevant lesson on how we might perceive the role of Christianity today, our study of his Trinitarian theology will help us to better discern how the triune God interacts with us.

CHAPTER 4

THE LIFE AND WORK OF KARL BARTH

The previous chapters presented the sociopolitical history of the Chin and the development of Chin Christianity. We are aware that Christianity transformed the life of the Chin and inspired them in their long struggle under the aggression of Burmese nationalist politics. But it is not an exaggeration to state that Chin Christianity today is in need of a better theological principle that truly speaks to the sociopolitical world. Karl Barth is considered a relevant figure in this regard. When theology in the early 20th century European world failed to raise its prophetic voice against the domains of dehumanizing economic and sociopolitical institutions, it was Barth who cared for observing what went wrong with theology and came to restore the transformative role of theological professionalism in the sociopolitical world based on his interaction with the Gospel. Not least, Barth's response to the sociopolitical issues is both ideological and practical. The significance of Barth's theological contribution is that, for reaffirming the transformative role of Christianity in its sociopolitical context, he turns to the Bible as the source for theological renewal, thereby striving to define the practice of theology as a way of correcting and shaping the flow of sociopolitical disorders. With that in mind, this chapter presents how Barth was formed theologically, how his pastoral ministry in Safenwil and experience of wars changed his view of theology and moved him to pursue a new theological thinking in light of the Gospel, which served as the main theological base for dealing with the Nazi Germany, the effects of wars, and issues of ecumenism.

Theological Formation

Known as the greatest theologian after Frederick Schleiermacher, Karl Barth was born in Basel, Switzerland on 10 May 1886.¹ His Father Fritz Barth, who was Professor of Theology at the University of Berne, “belonged to the theologically conservative, biblically oriented and evangelical wing of the church—although he was not a fundamentalist.”² Karl’s mother, Anna, was the daughter of a conservative Reformed pastor.³ Given that he was brought up in a devoted Christian family, Karl Barth enjoyed the experience of his faith being nourished in positive evangelical theology throughout his childhood.⁴ His passion for the Gospel grew while he was in confirmation classes in 1901-02. When describing Barth’s childhood experience of faith, Eberhard Busch notes, “through severe inner struggles he arrived at the assurance that all man’s salvation is to be found only in Jesus, and it was now his joy in life to proclaim this good news.”⁵ Following his confirmation classes, Barth decided to study theology with the hope that “through such a course of study I might reach a proper understanding of the creed in place of the rather hazy ideas that I had at that time.”⁶ Having said that, the young Barth did not regard the question of Christian thought as a purely theoretical one; it concerned

¹ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, translated by John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 1.

² Frank Jehle, “Intellectual and Personal Biography I: The Young Barth (1886-1921),” translated by Paul T. Nimmo and Paul Dafydd Jones, *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, edited by Paul T. Nimmo and Paul Dafydd (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 16.

³ John Webster, *Karl Barth: Outstanding Christian Thinkers Series*, 2nd Edition (New York: Continuum, 2004), 2-3.

⁴ Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology, 1910-1931* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1962), 15.

⁵ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 1.

⁶ Busch, 31.

real life.⁷ Accepting his father's advice, Barth began his study at the University of Berne in 1904.⁸ He spent more than half of his student life in Berne.⁹ Thus, his meetings with renowned teachers, like New Testament Professor Rudolf Steck there, helped him to be aware of the historical critical methodology.¹⁰ His study at Berne also introduced him to the philosophy of Emmanuel Kant, which he called "the true knowledge of simplicity."¹¹

For the later semesters of his study, Barth went to Germany: first to Berlin, then to Tübingen, and finally to Marburg.¹² His encounter with Adolf Von Harnack (1851-1930) in Berlin served as a remarkable experience in the process of his theological formation. Barth's admiration for Harnack grew as he listened to the latter's lecture on the history of dogma, which emphasized historical criticism. Being absorbed into Harnack's class, he had even neglected to attend other great lectures and to visit beautiful museums and sites in Berlin.¹³ He stepped away from his father's positive evangelical line when he happened to opt for being drawn into the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher during his time in Berlin, who became the leading light in his thought.¹⁴ In 1908, Barth went to Marburg for studying with Wilhelm Herrman, whom his father never recommended for him, but who turned out to be the main formative figure in the

⁷ Busch, 30-31.

⁸ Busch, 33.

⁹ Jehle, 17.

¹⁰ Jehle, "Intellectual and Personal Biography I," 18.

¹¹ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 35.

¹² Jehle, "Intellectual and Personal Biography I," 19.

¹³ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 39-40.

¹⁴ Busch, 40.

development of his intellectual life.¹⁵ As Marburg gave him the opportunity to learn the thoughts of Kant and Schleiermacher based on his interaction with Herrmann, Busch writes, “Barth acquired from Herrmann a distinctive combination of Kant’s philosophy and Schleiermacher’s religion.”¹⁶ Barth confessed that, while his Marburg teacher was so much surrounded by Kant and Schleiermacher the decisive thing, he learnt from him was the Christocentric impulse.¹⁷ According to Bruce McCormack, God for Herrmann was “a unique, transcendent, supramundane being, not to be confused with the world which science knows.”¹⁸ McCormack continues to comment on Herrmann’s concept of God in that “Knowledge of God is a gift—a divine creation of faith in an individual. It is something that comes to us from without; it is a given and not something we create.”¹⁹ In Webster’s words, Herrmann’s influence on Barth was so substantial in that, through his act of articulating a coherent account of Christianity that took Kant and Schleiermacher with full seriousness, Herrmann enabled Barth to set a limit to his adopted liberalism.²⁰

In general, his experience of studying with Harnack in Berlin and with Herrmann in Marburg between 1904 and 1909 brought Barth into contact with protestant

¹⁵ Webster, *Karl Barth*, 3.

¹⁶ Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth’s Theology*, translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley, edited and Annotated by Darrel L. Guder and Judith J. Guder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 17.

¹⁷ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 45.

¹⁸ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909-1936* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 55.

¹⁹ McCormack, 56.

²⁰ John Webster, “Introducing Barth,” *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, edited by John Webster (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), 2-3.

liberalism.²¹ He was immersed in the world of the modern theology characterized by Kant's philosophy, Schleiermacher's theology, Harnack's idea of historical criticism, and Herrmann's transcendental concept of God and the inner experience of faith. "At the end of my student days," Barth said, "I was second to none among my contemporaries in credulous approval of the modern theology of the time."²² Barth fully diverted from the tendencies of his grandfather and his father when he made himself "a committed disciple of the modern school, which was still dominant up to the time of the First World War, and was regarded as the only school world belonging to."²³ Clearly, the modern school of thought tended to interpret Christianity "on the one hand as a historical phenomenon to be subjected to critical examination, and on the hand as a matter of inner experience, of a predominantly moral nature."²⁴ Barth had been pretty comfortable in this theological environment, at least, for a while until after he came to find himself in a new theological world, where he was set to think different from what he used to before. In what follows, we will look at how Barth pursued his pastoral ministry and how that experience caused him to break with his admired modern theology received from his German teachers.

Pastoral Ministry

Soon after having finished his study in Marburg in 1909, Barth took the role of an assistant pastor in Geneva. His approach to the pastoral ministry basically reflected his connection with the modern theology. In one of his first sermons, Barth defined the

²¹ Busch, *The Great Passion*, 17.

²² Busch, *Karl Barth*, 46.

²³ Busch.

²⁴ Busch.

nature of pastoral ministry as becoming good friends, pathfinders and leaders of the sphere of the inner life. He was reported to say, “We pastors and theologians have neither to administer nor to distribute religion: our task is always to arouse, to encourage and to shape.”²⁵ Being a young pastor, his duties included pastoral care as well as preaching and instruction. He spent a great deal of time in relief work with the poor, thereby making acquaintance with real poverty.²⁶ Meanwhile, Barth criticized the religious socialists, accusing them of being incapable of “really standing beside the rank and file of the poor.”²⁷ His pastoral ministry was thus marked by his active solidarity with the poor.

Barth began his pastoral work in Safenwil in 1911.²⁸ The village was predominantly known as an agricultural and industrial community. The survey made in 1910 revealed that the village consisted of 247 houses with 1625 inhabitants.²⁹ In his inaugural sermon built on John 14:24, Barth stated, “I am not speaking to you of God because I am a pastor. I am a pastor because I *must* speak to you of God.”³⁰ As he was deeply involved in his pastoral work, Barth became less “inclined to pursue his own course of research along the lines of liberal theology.”³¹ His interaction with the industrial community in Safenwil made him to be interested in socialism, introduced him

²⁵ Busch, 52.

²⁶ Busch, 55.

²⁷ Busch, 55.

²⁸ Webster, *Karl Barth*, 4.

²⁹ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 60.

³⁰ Busch, 61.

³¹ Busch, 68.

to the real problems of real life, and led him to stand in solidarity with the workers.³²

While a fuller discussion on his view of socialism is set to come later, it is relevant to provide a picture of how Barth identified with—or took concrete steps in response to—the real context of his pariah. As Busch reports it, 587 of 780 wage-earners in Safenwil at the time were employed in industrial work or factories owned by the Hussy family, which was highly respected in the church as well as in the civic community. The workers were paid extremely low wages, and as they were not organized in a trade union they could do hardly anything to protect themselves.³³ In response, Barth arranged a course for the workers that took place every Tuesday evening. Starting in January 1916, the course dealt with ordinary practical questions on working orders, money management, and women's employment. As he recalled it later, Barth expressed, "I am doing it without enthusiasm, simply because it is necessary."³⁴ He gained an increased support and solidarity from the congregation while receiving a bitter and harsh response from the industrialist family members.³⁵ When he joined the Social Democratic Party in January 1915, Barth plainly attested, "I did not permit myself to float in the clouds above the current evil world any longer, for right now it must be shown that faith in what is greatest does not exclude but rather includes work and suffering in the imperfect."³⁶ He was active in party politics and attended the party conference as an official delegate. He took part in public disputes with capitalists and factory owners in Safenwil. His identification with exploited workers

³² Busch, 69.

³³ Busch.

³⁴ Jehle, "Intellectual and Personal Biography I," 24.

³⁵ Jehle.

³⁶ Jehle, 24-25.

through political means led to serious conflicts in his congregation.³⁷ However, his intention for joining the political party did not reflect a party-political commitment, but a sign of active solidarity with the workers.³⁸ He took sides with them as they struggled for gaining better working conditions and more adequate pay from their employers.³⁹

Speaking against capitalism, Barth always advocated the principle of socialism for his pariah community. His concept of socialism was drawn from his understanding of the Gospel. When he gave a lecture on Jesus Christ and the Social Movement in December 1911, Barth described the ministry of Jesus in four aspects: “Jesus wanted to help those who are least; to establish the Kingdom of God here upon this earth; to abolish self-seeking private property; and to make persons into comrades.”⁴⁰ One of his lectures in 1914 discussed Gospel and socialism, while his sermons in that summer linked God and socialism.⁴¹ As Busch states it, Barth was adamant that “socialism is a very important and necessary application of the gospel.”⁴² Barth, according to Eberhard Jungel, held that “the content of socialism must be identified as justice for humanity, not merely as improvement of the lot of the working class The innermost essence of socialism should surely be a passion for justice for each and every person.”⁴³ The concept of socialism, thus, served as a leading factor in his pastoral work in Safenwil. Barth was

³⁷ Clifford Green, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*, edited by Clifford Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 14.

³⁸ Jehle, “Intellectual and Personal Biography I,” 25.

³⁹ Karl Barth, *How I Changed My Mind* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966), 21.

⁴⁰ McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 87.

⁴¹ Green, *Karl Barth*, 14.

⁴² Busch, *Karl Barth*, 80.

⁴³ Eberhard Jungel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 89.

called “red pastor” due to his involvement in political activity that pushed him to advocate socialist principles for working people. According to Christiane Tietz, “Christianity for Barth was no longer a matter primarily of the inner life. Now it had to do with concrete external problems.”⁴⁴ Being immersed in the world of ordinary people Pastor Barth spoke for and stood with them in their real situation. However, he was still able to give priority to preaching and confirmation instruction. His sermons were friendly in tone, “simply worded, with numerous examples from daily life, but always clear and challenging.”⁴⁵ In short, Barth’s progressive example clarifies that the nature of pastoral ministry is pragmatically concerned for addressing the contextual needs of the people.

Break with Liberal Theology

Trained in modern theology, Barth was still seen as a liberal when he started his pastoral work at Safenwil.⁴⁶ The early period of his theology, as Thomas F. Torrance states, was shadowed by the “thought-forms of the liberal theology of religious individualism formulated under the impact of the Romantic Idealist philosophy of the nineteenth century.”⁴⁷ While valuing human intellectualism and the modern outlook of the world, this liberal theology inspired a critical attitude towards the Bible and the ecclesiastical tradition.⁴⁸ In general, liberal theology had the tendency to value natural

⁴⁴ Christiane Tietz, *Karl Barth: A Life in Conflict* (Oxford: University Press, 2021), 63.

⁴⁵ Tietz, 66.

⁴⁶ Busch, *The Great Passion*, 7.

⁴⁷ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 33.

⁴⁸ Torrance.

religion rather than revealed religion.⁴⁹ Barth became suspicious of the credibility of liberal theology when he saw the economic hardships troubling workers and farmers around him and was touched by the real problems of life.⁵⁰ At this point, he suspected that the liberal theology did not speak adequately to the real life of the poor workers in their daily struggles or that it was not prepared to stand in solidarity with them.⁵¹ “By totally accommodating itself to modern culture,” George Hunsinger argues,

liberal theology had forfeited a standpoint of its own and had rendered itself virtually pointless. It had no adequate basis to speak about the proper subject matter of theology—the sovereignty of God It had, moreover, no adequate basis to criticize and counteract the evils of contemporary society, and no adequate basis to hope and work for a really better world.⁵²

Exposing its dysfunctionality, Barth contended that liberal theology failed to inspire Christians to stand with the poor, speak for them, or live in solidarity with them. His trouble with the liberal theology only worsened when it came to the German involvement in World War I.⁵³ To Barth’s great disappointment, “ninety-three German intellectuals issued a terrible manifesto, identifying themselves before all the world with the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II and Chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg.”⁵⁴ He was dismayed when he discovered that almost all his German teachers were among the signatories whom Barth described as compromising their theological position in the face of the

⁴⁹ Stanley J. Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Cambridge: B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 71-72.

⁵⁰ Busch, *The Great Passion*, 18.

⁵¹ Busch.

⁵² George Hunsinger, *Karl Barth and Radical Politics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), 199.

⁵³ Busch, *The Great Passion*, 18.

⁵⁴ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 81.

ideology of war.⁵⁵ In his view, many liberal theologians were mere servants of public opinion.⁵⁶ In criticizing German Christian thinkers and church leaders who supported the war, Barth raised this question: “Where was the power of the Gospel? How is it that two thousand years now after Christ these so-called Christian nations, who desire to be the light of the world, confront each other with the one thought of harming each other, if possible of destroying each other with all force”⁵⁷ Disillusioned with the conduct of his admired teachers, he said, “I perceived that I should not be able any longer to accept their ethics and dogmatics, their biblical exegesis, their interpretation of history, that at least for me the theology of the nineteenth century had no future.”⁵⁸ The collapse of any hope that he had placed on his teachers moved him to dig a new foundation of theology.⁵⁹

His breakthrough to a new theology was finally secured by the emergence of his groundbreaking Romans commentary, published in 1919.⁶⁰ Roman Catholic theologian Karl Adam remarked that the commentary “fell on the playground of the theologians like a bomb.”⁶¹ Here, Barth proved that the historical-critical approach to the Bible was insufficient. His critique of the historical-critical trend was a response to “the dominance of historism in Protestant theology at that time.”⁶² In Barth’s view, the role of historical

⁵⁵ Busch, 81.

⁵⁶ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 33.

⁵⁷ Jehle, “Intellectual and Personal Biography I,” 27.

⁵⁸ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 38.

⁵⁹ Torrance, 38.

⁶⁰ Webster, *Karl Barth*, 5.

⁶¹ Jehle, “Intellectual and Personal Biography I,” 29.

⁶² Tietz, “Karl Barth’s Historical and Theological Significance,” 10.

criticism could not lead to genuine understanding and interpretation of the Bible. It could not produce a creative energy found in the biblical exegesis of Luther and the systematic interpretation of Calvin. In praising the effective role shown by the biblical exegesis and theological interpretation of the Reformers, he said, “Paul speaks, and the man of the sixteenth century hears.”⁶³ Such a liberative approach to the Bible repudiated the position of his contemporaries who viewed the Bible as history containing an ancient Hellenistic religion that cannot lay *a priori* dogmatic claim to special attention and consideration.⁶⁴

The main problem of historism inherent in the modern theology is that it “had made the revelation of God into an inner-worldly phenomenon.”⁶⁵ In objection to this trend, Barth held that “the proper starting point of theology is neither human subjectivity, nor the historian’s critical research with an eye towards the simplicity of the Gospel (Harnack), but God’s way to us—God’s free decision to create and encounter humanity in the world.”⁶⁶ While the act of approaching Paul and the Bible was not a welcomed development in the academic theology of the time,⁶⁷ Barth turned to the apostle Paul in the Bible for companionship in seeking to take God seriously in a new and different

⁶³ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 7.

⁶⁴ Richard Burnett, “Historical Criticism,” *Karl Barth: The Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology*, edited by Richard Burnett (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 100.

⁶⁵ Tietz, “Karl Barth’s Historical and Theological Significance,” 18.

⁶⁶ Christophe Chalamet, “Barth and Liberal Protestantism,” *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, edited by Paul T. Nimmo and Paul Dafydd (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 135.

⁶⁷ Amy Marga, “Reading Karl Barth’s Romerbrief 1919 for a Postcolonial Era of Theology,” *Karl Barth’s Epistle to The Romans: Retrospect and Prospect*, edited by Christophe Chalamet, Andreas Dettwiler and Sarah Stewart-Kroeker (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2022), 353.

way.⁶⁸ Barth was reported to disclose: “The apostle Paul gave me special evidence about the truth and clarity of the Bible’s testimony.”⁶⁹ His unprecedented treatment of the book of Romans declares that Barth was determined “to hear the Word of God out of the Bible, as it came straight from above, unfettered by a masterful culture, uncontrolled by the needs and satisfactions of bourgeois society”⁷⁰ In his lecture, entitled, “The New World in the Bible” (1917), Barth stated that “The Bible does not tell us how we are supposed to talk with God, but rather what God says to us. It does not say how we are to find our way to him, but how God has sought and found the way to us.”⁷¹ Renouncing the liberal theology’s failure to recognize the Bible as the account of God’s revelation to human history, Barth clearly affirmed, “We have found in the Bible a new world, God, God’s sovereignty, God’s glory, God’s comprehensible love. Not the history of men but the history of God. Not the virtues of men but the virtues of him who hath called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.”⁷² In contrast to the liberal tendency toward domesticating God in the confine of human consciousness, Barth’s new theology stresses, “God and the knowledge of God are never the secure possession of human beings.”⁷³ In all these, Barth argued that theology had to begin with God.⁷⁴ His unusual approach to

⁶⁸ Amy Marga, “Karl Barth’s Romans Commentary 1919: A Document to the Living God, One Hundred Years Later,” *Word & World* 39, no. 3 (Summer 2019): 242.

⁶⁹ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 99.

⁷⁰ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 35.

⁷¹ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and Theology*, translated by Amy Marga (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 25.

⁷² Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, translated by Douglas Horton (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957), 45.

⁷³ McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 141.

⁷⁴ Tietz, “Karl Barth’s Historical and Theological Significance,” 11.

the Bible helped to restore the belief of the sovereignty and the freedom of God less emphasized in European Christianity, driving him to “penetrate into the new world of the New Testament to grasp its redemptive, supernatural and eschatological message”⁷⁵ This uncommon turn to the Bible serves as the shaping principle in his entire theology.

Barth’s act of engaging the Romans undermining historical criticism received sharp reactions from prominent theologians and scholars like Harnack who even accused Barth of destroying the academic character of theology.⁷⁶ Barth was labeled as being gnostic, pneumatic, biblicist, enthusiast, and was pronounced “contemptuous of scientific exegesis” and declared an “enemy of historical criticism.”⁷⁷ But Barth would withstand every criticism on his way, for he was clear that the Word of God plays its transformative role only when the Bible is interpreted without being dominated or controlled by the tool of historical criticism inherent in the theology of 19th century Protestant liberalism.

Life in Germany

The success of his Romans commentary required Barth to move to Göttingen University, where he was appointed Honorary Professor of Reformed Theology.⁷⁸ The move from Safenwil to Göttingen was a decisive event for Barth.⁷⁹ His approach to the task of academic theology in Göttingen served as an intensification of the new theological breakthroughs he had grasped in Safenwil. In January 1922, he was awarded

⁷⁵ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 35.

⁷⁶ Tietz, “Karl Barth’s Historical and Theological Significance,” 11.

⁷⁷ Burnett, “Historical Criticism,” 99.

⁷⁸ Webster, *Karl Barth*, 5.

⁷⁹ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 126.

the title of “Doctor of Theology” by the Faculty of Protestant Theology at Münster, who recognized his substantial role in the development of theological thoughts, especially the second edition of his *Romans* commentary (1922).⁸⁰ In Göttingen, Barth extensively engaged in heavy study of Classical and Reformed Christian writings, the Heidelberg Catechism, and Calvin’s *Institutes*.⁸¹ Taking his position as a Reformed thinker, what he covered in his lectures, for instance, included the observation on how Christological debates had been carried out in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as well as in the fourth and the fifth.⁸² During the winter of 1923-24, he taught a course on the theology of Schleiermacher. While being a liberal theologian, Barth “had praised Schleiermacher for adjusting the insights of the Reformation to the religious individualism and historical relativism of the modern world and called him one of the deepest Christian thinkers of all times.”⁸³ However, after taking a new turn to theology since his days in Safenwil, Barth took a critical position towards the theology of Schleiermacher, whom he even described as “confusing theology with anthropology, concentrating on the piety and God-consciousness of human beings instead of God and God’s revelation in Jesus Christ.”⁸⁴ Meanwhile, his teaching at Göttingen allowed him to develop dogmatics as a course that would eventually become *Church Dogmatics*. In this process, he listened to orthodoxy

⁸⁰ Eberhard Busch, “Intellectual and Personal Biography II: Barth in Germany (1921-1935),” *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, edited by Paul Dafydd Jones and Paul T. Nimmo (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 34.

⁸¹ Webster, *Karl Barth*, 5-6.

⁸² Busch, “Intellectual and Personal Biography II,” 38.

⁸³ Matthias Gockel, “Schleiermacher,” *Karl Barth: The Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology*, edited by Richard Burnett (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 198.

⁸⁴ Gockel, “Schleiermacher,” 199.

and developed a positive interest in the Fathers of the early church and to some extent in Catholic scholasticism. The theological faculty in Göttingen demanded that his dogmatics be announced as Reformed dogmatics. But Barth declined to comply with that resolution, because he did not want to compromise the ecumenical character of his teaching.⁸⁵

Barth continued to be fully committed to dealing with the crisis of the modern theology based on his perception of the Word of God. In this regard, he set out to produce a theological journal called *Zwischen den Zeiten* (Between the Times) starting in August 1922. Eduard Thurneysen, Friedrich Gogarten and Barth himself, who were the co-founders of the journal, announced in one voice: “in founding the journal we rejected the positive-liberal or liberal-positive theology of neo-Protestantism from the beginning of the century... What we wanted was a theology of the Word of God” whose model was found among the Reformers.⁸⁶ As Cynthia L. Rigby writes, the emergence of *Zwischen den Zeiten* truly reflected the concrete realities of Germany in its transitional period. At the end of World War I, Germany suffered losses in terms of both territory and identity, and was forced to bear all responsibility for starting the war. Globally, the numbers of people killed, captured or lost in WWI exceeded fifteen million. Meanwhile, twenty to forty millions additional people died between 1918 and 1920 of the influenza pandemic. After all these terrible experiences there emerged a new era called the Weimar Republic, which would characterize the former German Reich until 1933. Intellectual and artistic life and productivity in Germany were beginning to flourish again. It was during this period of transition that Barth and his friends took steps toward publishing the journal

⁸⁵ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 154-155.

⁸⁶ Busch, 144-146.

Zwischen den Zeiten (Between the Times) “not only in honor of the historical situation they faced, but in recognition that the work of theological reflection always takes place between the now and the not yet—between the coming of Christ and the coming to fruition of the Kingdom.”⁸⁷ The journal was supposed to fill the vacuum left by modern theology. A new theological movement called “dialectical theology” was born in the month when *Zwischen den Zeiten* was first published.⁸⁸ Barth was in the inner circle of the group of dialectical theologians. The appearance of dialectical thinking helped to reimagine God within the dominant culture of the time. In general, dialectical theology “attempted to set the whole of Protestant theology up against the tradition influenced first and foremost by Friedrich Schleiermacher.”⁸⁹ Instead of combining God and humanity, dialectical theology preserves the sheer otherness of God or the infinite distance between God and humanity.⁹⁰ By eliminating relationalism, Barth’s dialectical method served to clear the way for the concrete sovereignty of God.⁹¹ Thus, Barth’s dialectical theology is understood as a theology of the Word dealing with God’s Word, God’s revelation, God’s kingdom, and God’s act within human history.⁹²

⁸⁷ Cynthia L. Rigby, “Karl Barth (1886-1968),” *Empire and The Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians*, edited by Kwok Pui-lan, Don H. Compier, and Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 340.

⁸⁸ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 147.

⁸⁹ Dietrich Korsch, “Dialectical Theology,” *Karl Barth: The Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology*, edited by Richard Burnett (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2013), 51.

⁹⁰ Korsch, 52.

⁹¹ Hunsinger, *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, 213.

⁹² Busch, *Karl Barth*, 144.

In 1925, Barth accepted a call to the Faculty of Protestant Theology at the University of Münster where he taught dogmatics and New Testament exegesis.⁹³ He offered courses and lectures on topics like the Gospel of John, Calvin's *Institutes* and other more. He also had the opportunity of working on his *Church Dogmatics*.⁹⁴ One underlying reason for Barth to pursue *Church Dogmatics* was to respond to critics like Rudolf Bultmann, who "suspected Barth of relapsing into arid scholasticism."⁹⁵ Like the Romans commentary, *Church Dogmatics* sustained a protest against modern Protestantism while allowing Barth to bring Jesus Christ from the periphery of his thought into the center.⁹⁶ His time in Münster also provided him with the chance to connect with distinguished colleagues from the Roman Catholic faculty of theology.⁹⁷ He joined a local theological discussion group consisting of highly educated lay Catholics.⁹⁸ What Barth regarded as a problem of Roman Catholicism was its attempt "to claim control over God's grace instead of allowing it the controlling power."⁹⁹ His interaction with Catholic theology culminated with his seminar on Thomas Aquinas in the winter of 1929.¹⁰⁰ At that time, Barth came to grapple with Erich Przywara's

⁹³ Busch, "Intellectual and Personal Biography II," 39.

⁹⁴ Webster, *Karl Barth*, 6.

⁹⁵ Webster, 6.

⁹⁶ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 173.

⁹⁷ Busch, "Intellectual and Personal Biography II," 41.

⁹⁸ Amy Marga, "Barth and Roman Catholicism," *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, Vol.II, edited by George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 847.

⁹⁹ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 178.

¹⁰⁰ Keith L. Johnson, "Barth and Roman Catholicism," *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, edited by Paul Dafydd Jones and Paul T. Nimmo (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 147.

analogia entis seen as an elemental component of Roman Catholic theology. According to this view, there is a peaceful relation between God's reconciling and atoning activity within the created order. *Analogia entis* is basically viewed to "point toward the peace in the God-human relationship that grows out of creation and reconciliation."¹⁰¹ Barth's response to *analogia entis* was that there can be no peace between God and humans because of the disruption of sin and that peace between God and humans can come only through "the newly *created* person through the Holy Spirit."¹⁰² Despite some line of doctrinal differences, his encounter with Catholic friends served as an effective platform for him to be better aware of the thoughts of Catholic theologians regarding the Trinity, creation, sin, salvation, ecclesiology, and Mariology.¹⁰³ He disclosed, "My encounter and acquaintance with this form of Catholicism became very important to me."¹⁰⁴ His active interaction with the Roman Catholicism in the rest of his theological life made him open to seeing new points of convergence.¹⁰⁵ According to Marga, Barth's theology stands as a source of profound historical rapprochement between Catholics and Protestants. His continued engagement with Catholicism as a living faith tradition has helped to prepare Protestants to become trustworthy conservation partners to Rome.¹⁰⁶ In short, his willingness to speak with and hear from Catholics indicates that pursuing theology on the basis of the Gospel results in understanding, respect, and mutuality.

¹⁰¹ Marga, "Barth and Roman Catholicism," 848.

¹⁰² Marga, 848.

¹⁰³ Johnson, "Barth and Roman Catholicism," 152.

¹⁰⁴ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 168.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, "Barth and Roman Catholicism," 159.

¹⁰⁶ Marga, "Barth and Roman Catholicism," 854.

In early 1930 Barth moved to the University of Bonn to become the chair of systematic theology.¹⁰⁷ During his time there, as Busch writes, Barth “was at the height of his powers and the theological faculty became a stronghold of Protestant theology, drawing crowds of students from throughout Germany and beyond.”¹⁰⁸ One of his courses at Bonn dealt with the work of Anselm of Canterbury. When he wrote a book on Anselm’s theology in 1931 entitled *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* (*Faith Seeking Understanding*), he became fascinated by this basic concept:

God cannot be known except in the *faith* called forth by God’s disclosure of the truth That faith precedes knowledge means that knowledge has to do with the one true Subject that it can neither establish, nor prove, nor posit—precisely because that Subject establishes, proves, and posits itself. This Subject is not at the disposal of human beings, but comes to encounter human beings.¹⁰⁹

Barth’s real epistemology was about to emerge, which would replace the absolute subjectivism of the modern theology. In this new category, “God must show Himself. The *reality* of the Word of God as event precedes and grounds the possibility of the knowledge of it. Knowledge here means fundamentally acknowledgement. Thinking means thinking-after.”¹¹⁰ The priority of the Word of God in theology was reaffirmed. This logic effectively helped to enlarge the role of the Bible in doing theology, which was less visible in modern theology. Thus, his work on Anselm prepared the foundation for a new theological start that would reject any attempt to build theology on an

¹⁰⁷ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 199.

¹⁰⁸ Busch, “Intellectual and Personal Biography II,” 41.

¹⁰⁹ Busch, 42.

¹¹⁰ McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 425.

anthropological base.¹¹¹ Anselm's influence moved him to restart writing his dogmatics and ethics.¹¹² The first volume of Barth's *Church Dogmatics* was published in 1932.¹¹³

Also, his interaction with Anselm helped him to see the analogical concept in a new way. As already said, Barth reportedly repudiated the Catholic doctrine of the *analogia entis* which he even described as the invention of the Anti-Christ. In contrast to the Catholic concept, the new analogy he formulated through Anselm's help affirms faith as the underlying principle. The picture of a point of correspondence between God and human is here explained through the analogy of faith (*analogia fidei*) marked as Barth's new epistemological breakthrough. The only possibility of knowing God and his Word is the act of faith.¹¹⁴ It is postulated that his encounter with Anselm caused him to move from dialectical thinking to an analogical method mentioned as characterizing the whole structure of his later theology. Bearing Anselm's role in mind, Webster argues that the first period of Barth's theological trend before 1930 is dialectical in nature, which embodies "a polarized account of God and created humanity."¹¹⁵ As Webster continues, the trend of Barth's theology after 1930 is governed by "analogy," which provides the view of "a God-created and God-sustained correspondence between God and humanity."¹¹⁶ The prospect of phasing out the dialectical thread from the entire structure of Barth's later theology is not, however, favored by McCormack when he argues that

¹¹¹ Busch, "Intellectual and Personal Biography II," 42.

¹¹² Busch, 42.

¹¹³ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 212.

¹¹⁴ Busch, 216.

¹¹⁵ Webster, *Karl Barth*, 22.

¹¹⁶ Webster, 22.

“Through all the phases of his development after the break with Herrmannian liberalism in 1915, Karl Barth was a critically realistic dialectical theologian.”¹¹⁷ Opinions may continue to divide over whether “dialectic” still has a place in Barth’s later theology or is wholly replaced by “analogy.” But this is to be settled on the basis of which trend better represents the principle of Barth’s theology, which stands on the account of the Gospel.

The Rise of Hitler

The political events in Germany in the early 1930s disturbed Barth to an increasing degree.¹¹⁸ He took a significant political position when he dealt with the Nazi regime based on his perception of the Gospel characterizing his theology ever since his break with liberal theology. In protest against the growing madness and the threat to democracy, Barth, on 1 May 1931, declared his political standpoint by becoming a member of the Social Democrat Party.¹¹⁹ Seeing the Nazi ideology as already taking shape in the 1920s, he lamented, “I was utterly wrong at the time in seeing no danger in the rise of National Socialism, which had already begun I should have warned the Germans in quite another fashion against the disastrous courses on which they inexorably embarked, even in the years between 1920 and 1930.”¹²⁰ He now faced a real situation where life in Germany was reduced to brace for emerging controversial politics.

Adolf Hitler rose to power on January 30, 1933. Barth was shocked at seeing Christians embracing the dawning of the National Socialist regime as “a new hour of

¹¹⁷ McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 464.

¹¹⁸ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 216.

¹¹⁹ Busch, 217.

¹²⁰ Busch, 190.

God.”¹²¹ In Busch’s words, “Barth was even more shocked by the church’s full agreement with the new regime than he was by the regime itself.”¹²² In promoting his racist policy, Hitler adhered to a Manichean worldview in which “a good race—the Aryan—was to defeat an evil race, the Jews.”¹²³ Hitler persuaded German Christians to support his racism against the Jews, fuelling the long history of anti-judaic sentiment. By rekindling the spirit of the German unique “soul” entrenched in German culture and Christianity, Hitler aroused hatred for Jews whom he condemned as the murderers of Christ.¹²⁴ In this way, many Christians in Germany appeared to regard Jews as members of a strange race or of the people disowned by God.¹²⁵ Discrimination against the Jews was noticeable in German Christian ministers’ law that contained the pernicious Aryan paragraph: “non-Aryans or those married to non-Aryans could no longer be employed in the service of the church.”¹²⁶ Overcome by racist sentiment many German Christians at the time lacked a proper theological base to stop Hitler from persecuting the Jews.

Barth was determined to help the Evangelical Church to adhere to the Gospel in the face of this new regime and its ideology that was increasingly predominant. On the very first days of the Third Reich he gave a lecture on “The First Commandment as a Theological Axiom” in which he emphasized the danger of having “other gods” than

¹²¹ Busch, “Intellectual and Personal Biography II,” 44.

¹²² Busch, *The Great Passion*, 32.

¹²³ Amy Marga, “Karl Barth and the Barmen Declaration,” *T&T Clark Handbook of Political Theology*, edited by Ruben Rosario Rodriguez (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020), 179.

¹²⁴ Marga, 179.

¹²⁵ Busch, “Intellectual and Personal Biography II,” 47.

¹²⁶ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 229.

God in every theological attempt. He rejected the act of connecting the concept of revelation with other authorities like human existence, order, state, people and so on.¹²⁷ The first commandment—"you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3), in Barth's view, is "the decisive presupposition of theology, grounded in the free and gracious divine act of election which makes God the Lord of his people Israel."¹²⁸ While calling upon Christians in Germany to take first commandment against "other gods" in a serious manner, Barth reaffirmed the inseparable connection between Christians and Jews.¹²⁹ In this regard, he renounced the German Christians' utilizing of natural theology to defend the application of Nazi policies in the German church and their tendency to place the word of Adolf Hitler alongside Scripture as a source of authority.¹³⁰ When Emil Brunner claimed that Barth's denial that humans possess a natural capacity to know God undermines the integrity of God's act of creation, Barth contended that by affirming human's natural capacity for revelation the former "no longer has any ground to oppose the German Christian arguments or their policies."¹³¹ On October 18, 1933, Barth composed a farewell to *Zwischen den Zeiten*, demonstrating that he did not want people to see his articles alongside those of Gogarten whose theology the former regarded as a betrayal of the Gospel.¹³² Barth was enraged when he "saw in print Gogarten's

¹²⁷ Busch, 224.

¹²⁸ Busch, "Intellectual and Personal Biography II," 45.

¹²⁹ Busch, 45.

¹³⁰ Keith L. Johnson, "Barth on Natural Theology," *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, Vol.I, edited by George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 101.

¹³¹ Johnson, 103.

¹³² McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 420.

affirmation of Wilhelm I Stapel's dictum that the law of God is identical with the law of the German people."¹³³ The similar perception of natural theology was widespread among many German Christians and pastors. Their adherence to the natural theology led many pastors to construe their German racial uniqueness as part of God's revelation, thereby claiming that the historical moment of Hitler's seizure of power was a revelation from God.¹³⁴ In affirming God's work through the natural order theologians like Werner Elert and Paul Althaus held that Christians should accept the Führer as a gift of God to the needs of the German Volk and should accordingly recognize that God's call to the German church includes cooperating with Adolf Hitler in building the Nazi state.¹³⁵

As part of organizing measures of theological opposition to the new regime and its support by Christians, Barth published a pamphlet called *Theologische Existenz heute* (*Theological Existence Today*), starting in 1933. Through this pamphlet he claimed that theology should be done as if nothing had happened, implying that the hour of the National Socialist regime should not be recognized as binding upon Christian thinking, speaking, and acting; thereby calling the Protestant Christianity back to being bound only by the Word of God attested in the Bible.¹³⁶ Denouncing the German Christians' view of the church as being heretical, he argued, "church membership is not determined by blood, nor by race either."¹³⁷ The church does not need to serve men, nor the German

¹³³ McCormack.

¹³⁴ Marga, "Karl Barth and the Barmen Declaration," 186.

¹³⁵ Arne Rasmusson, "Barth and the Nazi Revolution," *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, Vol. II, edited by George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 972.

¹³⁶ Busch, "Intellectual and Personal Biography II," 44.

¹³⁷ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 226.

people. The church “has to proclaim the gospel even *in the* Third Reich, but not *under* it nor in *its* spirit.”¹³⁸ He sent a copy of the pamphlet to Hitler on July 1, 1933, with this declaration: “this is a word to the German Evangelical pastors. I am recommending that they should reflect on their special position and their particular work in the light of the most recent events in church politics.”¹³⁹ Up to 37, 000 copies had been printed when the pamphlet was banned on July 28.¹⁴⁰ While attending Reformation Day in Berlin on October 31, 1933, where he addressed a large gathering of pastors, Barth stated: “What has happened to the concentration camps? What (was done) . . . to the Jews? Is the church not complicit, because it has remained silent? Whoever has to preach the Word of God must say to such events what the Word of God says.”¹⁴¹ In fact, these bold words led to his later dismissal from the teaching position at Bonn by a court in Cologne.¹⁴²

Barth’s role in dealing with the political crisis of the time became even more momentous when looking at his connection with the Confessing Church, which was primarily responsible for the emergence of the Barmen Declaration. When a Free Synod met in Barmen on January 4, 1934, which consisted 167 Evangelical Reformed churches from throughout Germany, Barth presented a paper, entitled: “Declaration on the Right Understanding of the Reformation Confessions in the German Evangelical Church Today.”¹⁴³ In this paper, Barth declared that “the Church of Jesus Christ was never to be

¹³⁸ Busch, 226.

¹³⁹ Busch, 227

¹⁴⁰ Busch.

¹⁴¹ Busch, “Intellectual and Personal Biography II,” 46.

¹⁴² Busch.

¹⁴³ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 236.

confined to culturally bound, State-bound, or race-bound conditions. Rather, the true Church exists and is found in the various times, races, peoples, states, and cultures across the globe.”¹⁴⁴ His activity in formulating the theological position for the Confessing Church in the face of Hitler’s rule made him the main architect of the Barmen Declaration. He authored the six articles of the Declaration with the exception of one sentence, when he and two Lutheran delegates, Thomas Breit and Hans Asmussen, met to draft it in Frankfurt in early May of 1934.¹⁴⁵ Through the leadership of Asmussen the Declaration was accepted at the first Synod of Barmen on May 31, 1934. Busch writes,

Barmen designated Jesus Christ, as he is witnessed to us in holy scriptures, the one Word of God whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death. It rejected as false teaching the doctrine that there could be a different source of church proclamation from this one Word of God and (in the closing sentence of the Declaration) stated that to recognize the truth and to repudiate the error was “the indispensable theological foundation of the German Evangelical Church.”¹⁴⁶

In general, Barmen Declaration serves as Barth’s most successful mechanism in galvanizing congregations in the German Evangelical Church towards confronting the actions of the National Socialist regime through definite theological principle. In this regard, he challenged German Christians to reject every kind of natural theology and to trust only in the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.¹⁴⁷ The weakness of this Declaration at the time, however, was that it did not offer an explicit call for solidarity with the Jews. For Marga, “Barth’s theology at the time was not able to energize Protest individuals and communities to mobilize against the *racism* and the dehumanization that

¹⁴⁴ Marga, “Karl Barth and the Barmen Declaration,” 181.

¹⁴⁵ Marga, 182.

¹⁴⁶ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 247.

¹⁴⁷ Busch, 224.

was happening right under the Confessing Church's nose."¹⁴⁸ His dissatisfaction with the Confessing Church regarding its cool attitude toward the Jews grew over time. Accusing the Confessing Church of being heartless for the millions who suffer unjustly, Barth said, "When it speaks, it speaks only about its own affairs."¹⁴⁹ For him, "a true Confessing Church would have open doors and would exist in solidarity with the Jews and with all suffering people."¹⁵⁰ The growing tensions with the leaders of the Confessing Church caused him to lose the chance to speak at its synod in June 1934. The church forced him out of his leadership position in the Church in November of that year.¹⁵¹

Barth was banned from teaching at Bonn in the winter semester of 1934-35 due to his refusal to swear an oath to Hitler, which was expected of every Christian at the time in their workplace as a sign of recognizing his authority.¹⁵² Many professors at the University of Bonn were dismissed during the first years of the Nazi government for political reasons or for being Jews while the great majority of professors were neutral or supportive of the Nazi revolution.¹⁵³ Barth held that though he was a state official his faith as an evangelical Christian did not allow him to take the unconditional oath of obedience to Hitler.¹⁵⁴ He was found guilty and dismissed from his teaching position when he stood trial at a tribunal in Cologne on December 20, 1934. But his appeal

¹⁴⁸ Marga, "Karl Barth and the Barmen Declaration," 188.

¹⁴⁹ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 261.

¹⁵⁰ Busch, "Intellectual and Personal Biography II," 48.

¹⁵¹ Busch, *The Great Passion*, 34.

¹⁵² Busch, "Intellectual and Personal Biography II," 49.

¹⁵³ Rasmusson, "Barth and the Nazi Revolution," 973.

¹⁵⁴ Busch, *The Great Passion*, 33.

against the Cologne's judgment was successful. Barth was fined (a fifth of his annual salary) because of his refusal to give the Hitler salute and because of his remarks at the home of Jacobi in October 1933,¹⁵⁵ where he had discussed with a small group the question whether it was still possible to remain in the church under German Christian domination, thereby calling on people to stay in so long as they were not simply excluded and to take the line that "to collaborate means to protest."¹⁵⁶ No doubt, the main reason for Barth's condemnation and his forced removal from his teaching position at Bonn was not his refusal to swear to the oath but his wider attitude to the National Socialist regime. The Minister of Cultural Affairs dismissed him on June 22, 1935.¹⁵⁷

Life in Switzerland

Barth was immediately appointed a chair in the University of Basel two days after his dismissal from Bonn.¹⁵⁸ Despite the fact that he was requested by some prominent leaders of the Confessing Church to stay in Germany by taking up the offer of a teaching position in a new Reformed seminary, Barth moved to Basel in July 1935.¹⁵⁹ Barth's main task at the University of Basel was directed to the production of his *Church Dogmatics*. He engaged in reworking biblical and historical grounds on such topics as the doctrines of reconciliation, Christology, soteriology, anthropology, and ecclesiology.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 261.

¹⁵⁶ Busch, 231.

¹⁵⁷ Busch, 261.

¹⁵⁸ Busch, 261.

¹⁵⁹ Hans-Anton Andrewes, "Intellectual and Personal Biography III: Barth the Elder (1935-1968)," *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, edited by Paul Dafydd Jones and Paul T. Nimmo (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 54.

¹⁶⁰ Webster, *Karl Barth*, 8.

Barth never confined himself to pure scholarship works in Basel, however. Rather, he continued to be preoccupied with the course of events in Germany. In trying to preserve the true church and a just state he sustained his opposition to National Socialism even as he had no longer lived in Germany.¹⁶¹ He did not join a party as he had before but he continued to support the line of the Social Democrat Party in Switzerland.¹⁶² In furthering his political engagement he took part in founding “the secret Action National Resistance,” which was designed to oppose any compromise of the Swiss government in case of an invasion.¹⁶³ Traveling across Europe, he persuaded churches to side with the Barman Declaration.¹⁶⁴ Accusing Hitler of being Anti-Christ because he was anti-Semitic, Barth insisted that a legal democratic state should go in accordance with the message of the Gospel.¹⁶⁵ In Barth’s view, as Busch describes, *unconditional* resistance must be rendered against Hitler—ideological *and* military.¹⁶⁶ Barth felt it wrong, “for the Christian churches having spoken so thoughtlessly in nationalistic and militaristic terms during earlier wars, to want to keep equally thoughtless silence in a neutral and pacifist way in this particular war”¹⁶⁷ In April 1940, when he was 54, Barth joined armed military service and served for 104 days in all. He preached occasionally to his comrades,

¹⁶¹ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 271.

¹⁶² Busch, 303.

¹⁶³ Andrewes, “Intellectual and Personal Biography III,” 62.

¹⁶⁴ Busch, *The Great Passion*, 34.

¹⁶⁵ Busch, 34.

¹⁶⁶ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 303.

¹⁶⁷ Busch, 303.

ninety-five per cent of whom were non-churchgoers.¹⁶⁸ While serving as Professor of Theology at Basel University, Barth engaged in a truly remarkable hidden ministry, visiting and preaching regularly in Basel Prison.¹⁶⁹ In 1942-45, he was restless in opposing a Swiss law that prevented Jewish refugees from entering the country, because of which his telephone was wiretapped by the police.¹⁷⁰ Barth was piercingly critical of the Swiss neutrality at this particular time. He sharply condemned the Swiss government for exploiting the economically weak, for not having socialist representatives in the government, for restricting the freedom of the press and the freedom of speech, for curtailing the right of sanctuary, and for maintaining the lively trade between Switzerland and the Axis powers.¹⁷¹ His increasing influence in the resistance movement brought him into conflict with the official policy of his country.¹⁷² Based on Germany's pressure the Swiss government prohibited him from producing political statements in Switzerland.¹⁷³ The German government reportedly threatened the Swiss government if they did not silence Barth.¹⁷⁴ All of his works were banned in Germany in October 1938.¹⁷⁵ Barth paid the price, for he decided not to keep silent in the face of the dehumanizing Nazi regime.

¹⁶⁸ Busch, 305-06.

¹⁶⁹ Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1959), 8.

¹⁷⁰ George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson, "Karl Barth Professional Timeline," *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, Vol.I, edited by George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020),4.

¹⁷¹ Hunsinger and Johnson, 310.

¹⁷² Hunsinger and Johnson, 304.

¹⁷³ Busch, *The Great Passion*, 35.

¹⁷⁴ Rasmusson, "Barth and the Nazi Revolution," 975.

¹⁷⁵ Gorringe, *Karl Barth against Hegemony*, 121.

Barth's passion for dealing with the sociopolitical issues through effective theological frameworks is also visible in his participation in the ecumenical movement. When he attended the ecumenical seminar in Geneva in July 1935, Barth gave a lecture entitled "The Church and the Churches," in which he tried to present Jesus Christ as the reality of "church unity" reflecting on the Christological concentration manifest in the Barmen Declaration.¹⁷⁶ In 1947, he played a role in the formation of World Council of Churches (WCC) by contributing two preparatory studies, saying: "The Church, together with its commission with respect to the world, stands and falls with the presence and Lordship of Jesus Christ in the form of the authority of the Bible as defined."¹⁷⁷ Due to his ecumenical contribution Barth is admired and described as a worthy partner in theological learning by Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar.¹⁷⁸ Another Catholic theologian, Hans Küng, is reported to express that "Barth's doctrine of justification, the flashpoint of the Reformation, was completely compatible with the Roman teaching and thus provided a bridge between Roman Catholicism and Protestant theology."¹⁷⁹ Visser 't Hooft, who was an ecumenical scholar and the first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, honored Barth for his cautionary and critical voice to the development of the ecumenical movement and called him "a pastor to ecumenical pastors."¹⁸⁰ As he took part in world ecumenical leadership, Barth advocated

¹⁷⁶ Andrewes, "Intellectual and Personal Biography III," 53.

¹⁷⁷ Andrewes, 58-59.

¹⁷⁸ Torrance, *Karl Barth*, 30

¹⁷⁹ Michael Welker, "Barth and Ecumenism," *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, Vol.II, edited by George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 836.

¹⁸⁰ Welker, 833.

for Christian unity and solidarity with the poor and the hungry.¹⁸¹ He criticized the agreements reached by ecumenical representatives, which did not support real relationship, equality, and acceptance of the poor and the hungry.¹⁸² Realizing that the Ecumenical Council of Churches failed to develop a clear position toward the German Christians and German war-politics during World War II, Barth wrote a long series of ecumenical circular letters to Christian communities in different countries, explaining the position and message of the German Confessing Church and stressing the importance of the Barmen Theological Declaration not only for Germany but also for the whole ecumenical movement.¹⁸³ His vision for church unity always stood on the belief that the church exists only in service to the living Christ and that its unity is derived from him. Being recognized as a leading thinker of the ecumenical movement despite his existence on its margins, Michael Welker claims, Barth was always committed to this belief: “The mission of the church was to bear witness in the world to God’s love for the world.”¹⁸⁴

In general, Barth’s life in Switzerland from 1935 through his retirement from Basel in 1962 was richly colored with a multiple set of life commitments. He taught fulltime at the University of Basel, produced many works such as volumes of *Church Dogmatics*, energized the church struggle in the shadow of wars, reminded Christians of their political responsibility towards the state, and helped churches across Europe to reclaim their ecumenical unity in Christ. Throughout his writings and church leadership,

¹⁸¹ Boniface A Willems, *Karl Barth: An Ecumenical Approach to His Theology*, translated by Matthew J. Velzen (Glen Rock: The Paulist Press, 1965), 74.

¹⁸² Willems, 76.

¹⁸³ Welker, “Barth and Ecumenism,” 835.

¹⁸⁴ Welker, 842.

he constantly appealed Christians to resist the disorder of life characterized by authoritarianism, capitalism, racism, inequitable distributions of wealth, and so on. For him, the church “should publicly announce the liberty of the children of God who live in light of Christ’s victory over sin and death and in anticipation of his *parousia*.”¹⁸⁵

Starting from his earliest days, he always worked hard for epitomizing how Christianity should be perceived in sociopolitical contexts. He was successful in redefining the nature of Christianity when he understood it as bearing witness to the Gospel in the real world where it confronts racism, authoritarianism, or social injustices. For Barth, Christianity concerns the welfare of human life and is committed to serving it through its spiritual resources. Here, Barth is clear that Christianity is grounded in the theology of the Word of God. In describing the nature of Christianity as a socially engaged religion, Barth holds that its existence is a reflection of the incarnated Word of God, Jesus Christ, who is the Lord. The freedom inaugurated in us through our encountering of the Word makes us to choose freedom for our fellow humans by denying racism, authoritarianism, and social injustices. Our faith in Jesus serves as the ground for living as liberated children of God, who care for and are committed to the ministry of freedom and justice for others. This mission is to be carried out in the midst of the turbulent sociopolitical world by putting our trust in God who is the sovereign Lord. With the picture of the gloomy world situation in view Barth said these last words to his beloved friend Thurneysen: “But keep your chin up! Never mind! He will regain.” He died on December 10, 1968.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁵ Richard R. Osmer, “Barth and Practical Theology,” *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, Vol.II, edited by George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 803.

¹⁸⁶ Busch, *Karl Barth*, 498.

Summary

Barth was well trained in modern liberal theology. But his connection with this theology was short-lived. His break with this theology was prompted by his conviction that it did not show effectiveness in the face of real crisis characterizing his ministerial experiences. He was aware that this theology was dysfunctional, simply because it had fallen under the control of human subjectivity. In response to this, he turned to the biblical revelation in which God is portrayed as the sovereign and transcendental God, who transcends the realm of human knowledge and subjectivity. He comes to speak of the Word of God as the defining principle of the structure and function of theology. His perception of the Gospel, which remains as the core of his theological reflection, shapes his engagement with his sociopolitical environment. His understanding of the Gospel turns out to serve as a motivating source in his participation in the struggle for freedom, liberty, and social justice in the sociopolitical world. He became the voice of freedom for the dehumanized, the oppressed, and the poor. He was restless in the cause of seeking unity and healing in the midst of divisiveness. The version of Christianity known in Barth's personal life and his theological principle thus wholly concerns the humanization and liberation of the oppressed and the poor. He clearly demonstrates that Christianity should be seen in the real sociopolitical world where it reflects the love, freedom, and righteousness of God. How Barth comes to lay out the new foundation for a liberating and transformative Christianity will be seen in the next chapter, which deals with how he presents the being and act of the triune God, who encounters and embraces humanity.

CHAPTER 5

EXPLORING BARTH'S TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY OF FREEDOM

Clifford Green famously deemed Karl Barth a “theologian of freedom” when he argued that “The center of Barth’s theology is the freedom of God acting in love toward humanity in Jesus Christ, which sets us free in all spheres of life.”¹ Of course, the preceding chapter extensively dealt with how Barth reflected the idea of divine freedom in both ideological and practical means. It is relevant to claim that it was his perception of divine freedom that basically inspired him in the struggle for freedom, justice, Christian unity, and healing in the face of the dehumanizing forces such as racism, authoritarianism, divisiveness. How does Barth engage the freedom of God in his theology? While preserving the idea of the transcendence of God, which denied the modern liberal theology’s tendency to domesticate God within the realm of subjective human consciousness, Barth defended that the eternal God exercises his freedom to find home with humanity in history. This chapter, therefore, aims to explore how Barth comes to develop his Trinitarian theology in a way that helps us to grasp how freedom has been imagined in the life and act of the triune God. The recent scholarship on Barth’s studies is largely driven by the arguments on how divine freedom plays its role in the unfolding process of Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity. While McCormack reads Barth as suggesting that God uses his freedom to constitute his own being to become the triune God for

¹ Clifford Green, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom*, edited by Clifford Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 11.

electing humanity, Molnar and Hunsinger claim that God's exercising of his freedom for humanity reflects his eternal identity as the triune God who loves in freedom. The emergence of this debate produces curiosity for knowing how his treatment of divine freedom shapes his Trinitarian theology. In what follows, we will look at how debates on Barth's Trinitarian theology came to exist among scholars, and then analyze how Barth develops his doctrine of the Trinity, which pays attention to the role of divine freedom.

The Debate

In 2000, Bruce McCormack wrote a book chapter on Barth's doctrine of election published in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*. Considered as a groundbreaking rule in Barth's studies, McCormack's work basically suggests that Barth's Trinitarian theology has to be looked at through the point of how God in his freedom constitutes himself for electing humanity, depicting election as the decisive event in the inner life of God.² McCormack clarifies that the nature of election should be taken into consideration when interpreting Barth's Trinitarian theology. Describing election as the consequence of God's self-constitution in his divine life, McCormack remarks, "An act of self-determination that makes humility and obedience to be essential to God is clearly a freely willed activity that is constitutive of what and who God is."³ In putting the concept of freedom to the fore of his argument, McCormack claims that freedom in God must be defined by "the life-act in which God eternally *is*," meaning we should "not seek the meaning of divine freedom in some sort of ontic space behind the eternal decision in

² Michael T. Dempsey, "Love Is Free Or It Is Not Love: Why the Immanent Trinity Still Matters in the Thought of Karl Barth and in Contemporary Theology," *Science et Esprit* 60, no. 2 (2011): 252.

³ Bruce L. McCormack, "The Doctrine of the Trinity after Barth: An Attempt to Reconstruct Barth's Doctrine in the Light of His Later Christology," *Trinitarian Theology after Barth*, edited by Myk Habets and Phillip Tolliday (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 113.

which God elects and is triune.”⁴ The freedom of God, in his perspective, is “a freedom for self-determination, for self-*limitation* and suffering for the sake of human beings by which God chooses to be God for us in Christ, he is himself the being he will have for all eternity.”⁵ While affirming that freedom in God is freedom from external constraint or conditioning as well as all internal lack or deficiency, McCormack points out that “God’s freedom does not consist in a choice between alternatives. God’s freedom, by contrast, is a freedom *for* time. It is not a freedom that presupposes time.”⁶ When he clarifies that “freedom in God is not a choice among options,” McCormack also emphasizes, “It is rather the power to do all that is in God to do.”⁷ For him, freedom in God is the willed activity of God by which God constitutes himself to turn to and embrace humanity.

Accordingly, McCormack argues that Barth’s appropriation of divine freedom is integral to his doctrine of divine election, in which the life of Jesus Christ is seen as the consequence of the self-constitution of God for turning to humanity. The incarnation of the Son now comes to be viewed as the self-origination in the being of the free God, which then leads to the idea that “election is logically prior to the Trinity.” McCormack says, “Election and triunity are given together in one and the same eternal event. Neither has ontological priority over the other. But election has a logical priority over Trinity—

⁴ Bruce L. McCormack, “Processions and Missions: A Point of Convergence between Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth,” *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: An Unofficial Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack and Thomas Joseph White, O.P (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 124.

⁵ Bruce L. McCormack, “Election and the Trinity: Theses in Response to George Hunsinger,” *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, edited by Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 135.

⁶ McCormack, “Election and the Trinity,” 135.

⁷ Bruce L. McCormack, “Let’s Speak Plainly,” *Theology Today*, Vol. 67 (2010): 60.

because decision has a logical priority over being.”⁸ When McCormack brings up this view, he appears to conjecture that divine decision should not be seen in the light of how humans make decision. For him, “The divine decision that is election is not to be understood in analogy to decision-making on the human plane.”⁹ For instance, when humans make a decision, they make it only *after* deliberating the consequences of that decision. In contrast, the divine decision is understood as the expression of the divine intentionality.¹⁰ The divine decision, McCormack says, should not be attempted through the system of a “before and after” structure.¹¹ Claiming that there is no such thing as “before and after” in the being and act of God, McCormack comes to reason that it makes little sense if we say, “God’s being is ontologically anterior to the act of election.”¹² In this sense, he defines divine election as the act of God’s “self-determination by means of which God determines to be God, from everlasting to everlasting, in a covenantal relationship with human beings and to be God in no other way.”¹³ When God decides to elect humans in Jesus Christ, God does so at the point of determining himself in freedom, which would impact his ontological nature.¹⁴ For McCormack, “this is not a decision for

⁸ McCormack, “The Doctrine of the Trinity after Barth,” 115.

⁹ McCormack, “Election and the Trinity,” 134.

¹⁰ McCormack, 134.

¹¹ McCormack, 134.

¹² McCormack, 134.

¹³ McCormack, 134.

¹⁴ Bruce L. McCormack, “Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology,” *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, edited by John Webster (Cambridge: University press, 2000), 98.

mere role-play; it is a decision which has ontological significance.”¹⁵ Hence, he portrays Barth as implying that “election is the event in God’s life in which he assigns to himself the being he will have for all eternity.”¹⁶ Seeing election as a result of the self-constitution in God’s being, McCormack contends that “God must give himself being eternally in the act in which he sets himself in relationship to Jesus Christ and, in him, to the world. There is thus no metaphysical gap between God’s being and his acting.”¹⁷ In this regard, McCormack argues that Barth was concerned for liberating the being of God from a traditional classical theology.¹⁸ The intention of Barth, he claims, is “to effectively erase the concept of ‘being-itself’ as that which was allegedly classically to stand above, behind, or beneath the divine life,” which is known in history.¹⁹ He continues, “The electing God, Barth argues, is not an unknown ‘x.’ He is a God whose very being—already in eternity—is determined, defined, by what he reveals himself to be in Jesus Christ; viz. a God of love and mercy towards the whole human race.”²⁰ The event in which God constitutes himself as triune is the event in which God determines himself for the covenant of grace and for the human experience of suffering and dying *in time*.²¹ Simply put, God constitutes himself to become Jesus Christ for showing his mercy and

¹⁵ McCormack, “Grace and Being,” 98.

¹⁶ McCormack, 98.

¹⁷ McCormack, “Election and the Trinity,” 135.

¹⁸ McCormack, “Grace and Being,” 97.

¹⁹ Bruce L. McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon* (Cambridge: University Press, 2021), 166.

²⁰ McCormack, “Grace and Being,” 98.

²¹ Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 273.

love towards humans.²² McCormack also hints that there is “no eternal son if that Son is seen in abstraction from the gracious election in which God determined and determines never to be God apart from the human race.”²³ In taking such rare move, McCormack says, “I had no intention of suggesting that election has an ‘ontological priority’ over Trinity. I spoke only of a logical priority.”²⁴ For him, our interpretation of Barth’s view here should duly reflect how God uses his freedom in constituting himself for election.

Other scholars, like Paul D. Molnar and George Hunsinger, give critical and corrective responses to this unconventional approach. First, Molnar points out that McCormack’s argument on the logical priority of election over the Trinity is unjustifiable, thereby insisting that this is not what Barth intends to say in his doctrine of the Trinity. Molnar says, “To think of the Trinity as constituted by God’s decision to be for us in Jesus Christ is nothing less than to deduce the Trinity from the logic that places election prior to Trinity or equates them as one and the same act.”²⁵ When Barth speaks of the life of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Molnar asserts, he never implied it to be reduced to “his decision to be God for us.”²⁶ For that reason, he expresses, Barth does not “equate God’s eternal triune existence with his decision to be God-for-us.”²⁷

Accordingly, Molnar portrays McCormack as equating election and the Trinity, thereby

²² McCormack, “Grace and Being,” 99.

²³ McCormack, 100.

²⁴ McCormack, “Processions and Missions,” 120.

²⁵ Paul D. Molnar, “Can the Electing God Be God Without Us? Some Implications of Bruce McCormack’s Understanding of Barth’s Doctrine of Election for the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, edited by Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 77-78.

²⁶ Molnar, 78.

²⁷ Molnar, 78.

seeing the latter as collapsing the immanent Trinity into economic Trinity.²⁸ Denying McCormack's argument that election might be viewed as the result of a determinative act in the being of God, Molnar states that Barth's view of election has basically to do with how God elects himself and us in Christ for being in relationship with God, which is grounded in the being and will of God.²⁹ For Barth, Molnar says, "God is eternally and simultaneously Father, Son, and Spirit, who knows and wills himself in himself and for us."³⁰ In this way, Molnar rejects the notion that "God's self-determination logically precedes God's triunity."³¹ Although our knowledge of God is originated from the economic Trinity, he claims, our interaction with the economic Trinity must not exhaust the nature of the immanent Trinity. Molnar clearly states that, "He is God because he eternally loves in freedom as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."³²

In response to McCormack's interpretation of divine freedom, Molnar argues that God was free in his relation to us and that God "did not have to bind himself to us in covenant love."³³ As part of reclaiming Barth's idea of divine freedom, he states, "For Barth, then, creation might never have existed or could have existed differently according

²⁸ Molnar, 88.

²⁹ Molnar, 88.

³⁰ Molnar, 85.

³¹ Kevin W. Hector, "God's Triunity and Self-Determination: A Conversation with Karl Barth, Bruce McCormack, and Paul Molnar," *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, edited by Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 37.

³² Paul D. Molnar, "The Trinity, Election, and God's Ontological Freedom," A Response to Kevin W. Hector," *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, edited by Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 58.

³³ Molnar, 52.

to God's own free wisdom and love, and God was under no obligation to humanity."³⁴

Molnar continues, "God could not not be Father, Son and Holy Spirit without ceasing to be God; but God could be the Father, Son and Holy Spirit without electing us.

Nonetheless, out of sheer love, God eternally (but contingently) chose not be God without us."³⁵ Thus, Molnar argues that "the belief that God could have been God

without us but freely chose not to, enables one to recognize that God acting for us *as* the man Jesus cannot be reduced to what he does for us"³⁶ Contradicting McCormack's

portrayal of freedom as God's decision to constitute his being, Molnar echoes Barth's

word: "The freedom in which God exists means that He does not need His own being in order to be who He is: because He already has His own being and is Himself . . . this

being does not need any origination and *constitution*. He cannot 'need' His own being

because He affirms it in being who He is."³⁷ Emphasizing that Barth never has a tendency

to condense the eternal being of God to what he does in his works *ad extra*, Molnar says,

Barth never countenanced the idea that what happens in the economy *constitutes* who God is in eternity. Therefore, he was not opening a gap between the immanent and economic Trinity, since for him, there is only one Trinity active in eternity and temporally. Hence, the Trinity active in Christ's life, death, and resurrection and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is the very same eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit he is and would have been even if he never decided to create, reconcile, and redeem us.³⁸

³⁴ Molnar, 56-57.

³⁵ Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom: and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity*, 2nd Edition (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 153.

³⁶ Molnar, 161.

³⁷ CD II/1, 306; quoted in Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom: and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity*, 2nd Edition (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 163.

³⁸ Paul D. Molnar, *Freedom, Necessity, and the Knowledge of God: In Conversation with Karl Barth and Thomas F. Torrance* (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 21.

This means that God would remain the triune God who loves in freedom even if he had never acted as creator, reconciler, and redeemer.³⁹ In all these, Molnar attempts to argue that the triune nature of God or the distinctions within the Trinity is always essential to God's living and eternal being in Barth's view.⁴⁰ Therefore, he insists that the function of the freedom of God must not be confused with the idea of the constitution of divine life.

It is also important to look at how Hunsinger responds to McCormack's position, which he remarks as a revisionist construction of Barth's Trinitarian view.⁴¹ Like Molnar, Hunsinger claims that it is not justifiable to hold that election is the consequence of the self-constitution of God's being, because, as he states, "Barth nowhere says that God's being is constituted by God's act."⁴² Hunsinger continues, "Barth does not teach—and nowhere states—that act is a consequence of being, or that being is a consequence of act. They are equally and primordially basic."⁴³ Because Barth holds that God's being and act are inseparable, Hunsinger contends, we should not describe the former as indicating that divine act is prior to or constitutive of divine being.⁴⁴ In this way, Hunsinger reads Barth as affirming that "The Trinity is ontologically prior to and logically presupposed by the pretemporal act of election."⁴⁵ For him, the right treatment of how Trinity and election

³⁹ Paul D. Molnar, "Barth on the Trinity," *The Willey Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, Vol.I, edited by George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 31.

⁴⁰ Molnar, 31.

⁴¹ George Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology*, edited by Michael T. Dempsey (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2011), 91.

⁴² Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity," 93.

⁴³ Hunsinger, 93.

⁴⁴ Hunsinger, 93.

⁴⁵ Hunsinger, 94.

intersects each other in Barth's view never suggests that "election is ontologically prior to the Trinity, so that the Trinity is a consequence of election."⁴⁶ When the gracious God decides to elect humans, he does so out of his eternal identity as the triune God, who does not need to constitute himself by his decision to become incarnate Jesus Christ.⁴⁷ The living God, Hunsinger says, "does not need become the Holy Trinity by virtue of his decision of election, but in this pre-temporal act of self-determination, God becomes what he is as the Trinity in a different way. The tri-personal God becomes also for us what he is already in himself."⁴⁸ In contrast to McCormack's view that the concept of *Logos arsakos* (Word without flesh) is meaningless if seen independently from the event of incarnation, Hunsinger avows that the idea is essential to the logic of Barth's theology.⁴⁹ What he wants to clarify is that Barth's theology never accommodates the view that the eternal nature of the Holy Trinity can be collapsed into or identified with God's relationship with the world.⁵⁰ God manifests his eternal identity when he reveals into history as the triune God. This means that Barth never collapses the divine being into the divine act when he defines the life and act of the triune God. In explaining how Barth adheres to the precedence of Trinity over election in God's life, Hunsinger states,

For Barth, to say that God "determines" himself in election means that God ordains himself to be for the creature what he already is in and for himself; the triune God who loves in freedom Election is that which makes God what he

⁴⁶ Hunsinger, 99.

⁴⁷ Hunsinger, 101.

⁴⁸ Hunsinger, 104.

⁴⁹ Hunsinger, 105.

⁵⁰ Hunsinger.

is for us but not that which makes God what he is as the triune God in and for himself.⁵¹

Meanwhile, Hunsinger indicates that the position Barth has taken is motivated by his doctrine of “antecedence.” According to this belief, God does nothing in time that does not reflect his antecedent being in eternity. “What God is in revelation he is antecedently in himself God reiterates in time what he is in himself, and what he is himself forms the basis of his temporal activity.”⁵² This act of God in history discloses the humility of the eternal God fully manifested in Jesus Christ. For Hunsinger, the humility of Jesus in Barth’s view reflects a relational pattern within the eternal God’s triune being. This humility is grounded in the eternal being of God, who “reiterates it not because of an inner divine necessity but as a free choice made in recognition of an appointed order.”⁵³ In countering McCormack’s approach that describes election as the consequence of the self-constitution of God, Hunsinger comes to describe election as the disclosure of the self-humiliation on the part of God, thereby stating that “in this act of self-humiliation, God does not constitute himself as God but rather becomes God for us (and also for himself) in a new and very different way. He remains the same God he always was but now assumes the form of self-humiliation and death, and to that extent he assumes the form of his opposite.”⁵⁴ Thus, Hunsinger defends that the triune being of God is the eternal nature of God who embraces self-humiliation for the sake of electing human in

⁵¹George Hunsinger, *Reading Barth with Charity: A Hermeneutical Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 80.

⁵² Hunsinger, *Reading Barth with Charity*, 115-16.

⁵³ Hunsinger, 90.

⁵⁴ Hunsinger.

freedom. The triune God exercises his freedom to become God for us by externalizing his eternal nature characterized by the act of the self- humiliation of God. For Hunsinger,

The triune life of God is the basis of everything that God does outside himself. It is the basis of the “living act” that God directs to us. It is the basis of God’s relating to us as creatures who are different from himself. It is the basis of God’s electing us by grace in order to establish his covenant with us.⁵⁵

Hence, he emphasizes that Barth preserved the distinction between the immanent Trinity and economic Trinity. Calling the immanent Trinity “divine history₁” and the economic Trinity “divine history₂” Hunsinger stresses that the two divine histories “are related not only in inseparable unity but also in abiding distinction History₁ does not depend on history₂ and cannot be collapsed into it.”⁵⁶ By way of holding that this mirrors the basic form of Barth’s Trinitarian theology Hunsinger repeats, “God subsists perfectly in history₁ and through self-repetition in history₂. God’s triune being is revealed in history₂ but constituted in history₁ The eternal history in which God is God (history₁) is something perfect and sufficient in itself. It then forms the basis of God’s eternal self-repetition in relation to us (history₂).”⁵⁷ In short, Hunsinger is clear in arguing that Barth always maintains the distinction between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity and that he never has the tendency to engage divine freedom in a way that necessitates God to constitute his life but as how the triune God decides to embrace humanity in love.

Given divergent approaches to his view of divine freedom and its implication for the entire structure of his Trinitarian theology, the prospect of identifying which position better serves or bears more faithfulness to Barth’s thought requires us to read his doctrine

⁵⁵ Hunsinger, 87.

⁵⁶ Hunsinger, 123.

⁵⁷ Hunsinger, 126-27.

of the Trinity in a careful manner. In what follows, we will study how Barth develop his doctrine of the Trinity that accommodates divine freedom as an underlying principle.

The Root of the Doctrine of the Trinity

Barth engages the doctrine of the Trinity as a way for understanding how the eternal God reveals himself into human history. He developed his doctrine of the Trinity when it was neglected within the structure of modern liberal theology. “Prior to Karl Barth,” Hunsinger writes, “the doctrine of the Trinity had played a minor role in modern Protestant theology All this dramatically changed after Barth.”⁵⁸ It is thus relevant to assert that it was Barth who brought the Trinity back to the theological platform when it was losing ground. According to Barth, “The doctrine of the Trinity is what basically distinguishes the Christian doctrine of God as Christian, and therefore what always distinguishes the Christian concept of revelation as Christian, in contrast to all other possible doctrines of God or concepts of revelation.”⁵⁹ At this point, Barth is adamant that the Trinity is not the product of any theological argument normally drawn from human history, philosophy or religions, but belongs to biblical revelation.⁶⁰ For Hunsinger, Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity has only one source, not two. “Apart from God’s revelation in Christ,” Hunsinger writes, “nothing in the created order could function as a source or basis by which God’s triune identity could be known. No line of continuity could be traced from any triadic features of world phenomena to the

⁵⁸ George Hunsinger, “Karl Barth’s Doctrine of the Trinity, and Some Protestant Doctrines after Barth,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, edited by Gilles Emery, O.P. and Matthew Levering (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 294.

⁵⁹ *CD* I/1-8, 301.

⁶⁰ *CD* I/1, 342-43.

transcendental mystery of the Trinity.”⁶¹ Explaining how Barth tried to prevent the Trinity from being conceived as anthropocentric in origin, Alan Torrance argues,

The root of the doctrine of the Trinity resides with the Lordship of God, in the threefold Self-unveiling of the God who by nature cannot be unveiled The recognition of God in his manifestation can never be demonstrated historically in the way that Jesus’ humanity can be demonstrated historically It is by way of the Spirit’s presence in and with us that we are given the ‘eyes to see’ what ‘flesh and blood’ does not perceive. It is the Lordship of God in each of these three dimensions of God’s Self-disclosure that, for Barth, constitutes the root of the doctrine of the Trinity.⁶²

Therefore, the self-revelation of God, which brings us to the knowledge of the lordship of God, serves as the root of Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine has no other basis apart from this revelation.⁶³ The account of biblical revelation serves as the source for knowing how the eternal God self-discloses himself to humanity as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It stands as the channel by which God gives himself to be known, experienced, and acknowledged by human. It describes how God reveals, speaks, comforts, works, and aids in the process of God’s embracing of humanity in a Trinitarian way.⁶⁴ It helps us to know God as the God who assumes our language, world and humanity as he reveals himself to us, whom we hear with our ears.⁶⁵ This way, revelation enables us to discern God’s presence with us and his work among us through “the trice single voice of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.”⁶⁶ Thus, our interaction with revelation

⁶¹ Hunsinger, “Karl Barth’s Doctrine of the Trinity,” 298.

⁶² Alan Torrance, “The Trinity,” *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, edited by John Webster (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), 79.

⁶³ *CD* I/1-8, 312.

⁶⁴ *CD* I/1-8, 321.

⁶⁵ *CD* I/1-8, 347.

⁶⁶ *CD* I/1-8.

tells us about how God in his three persons “has and exercises His Freedom and Lordship.”⁶⁷ However, when he speaks of how God exercises his freedom and lordship as a self-revealing God in history, Barth never attributes those properties exclusively to one single person of the Trinity. Instead, he always insists that freedom, lordship, and Godhead equally belong to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The idea of how God exists as the triune God will be clearer when we turn to the view of the Triunity of God.

The Triunity of God

Barth’s concept of the Trinity is determined by his treatment of the Triunity of God and how he formulates the concept of the “threefold repetition” of the one God in the process. God reveals into the human world in his threefold repetition.⁶⁸ By employing this phrase of “threefold repetition,” Barth argues that the one God, who is Lord, reveals himself in his three modes of being without experiencing any change in his eternal divine essence. The idea of divine repetition does not, therefore, imply any alteration in the Godhead of one God.⁶⁹ Rather, as McCormack interprets Barth’s view, “That God is an eternal *repetition* in eternity means that the one divine I is fully Himself in each of His three modes of being, without diminution. Thus, to speak of a full equality of the modes of being is to affirm that God is fully and completely in each of His modes of being.”⁷⁰ In this regard, the reason for Barth to be prone to use the term “modes” in his Trinitarian framework reflects his dissatisfaction with the traditional use of the word “person.” Barth

⁶⁷ *CD* I/1-8, 307.

⁶⁸ *CD* I/1-8, 350.

⁶⁹ *CD* I/1-8.

⁷⁰ Bruce McCormack, “Trinity,” *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, edited by Paul T. Nimmo and Paul Dafydd (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 240.

is critical of the term “person” because he assumes that this use can lead to the idea of “absolute personality” or “the three personalities in God” in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit might be seen as autonomous divine beings.⁷¹ This means that he is reluctant to use “persons” because he is concerned that the idea of “persons” in the Trinity can lead to the idea of tritheism.⁷² At this point, Daniel Migliore states that Barth’s reluctance for using “persons” discloses Barth’s anxiety about the modern philosophical conceptions of personhood that “equate personal existence with the self-consciousness and autonomy of the individual.”⁷³ Likewise, Kevin Giles argues that Barth’s preference for “mode of being” expresses his practical fear that “the word person implies three centers of consciousness, something that would undermine the unity of the Christian God.”⁷⁴ Therefore, Barth’s main concern is to stress that the three divine persons are not three parts of God operating alongside one another in three different functions.⁷⁵ According to Barth, “Father, Son, and Spirit are not to be understood as three divine attributes, as three parts of the divine property, as three departments of the divine essence and operation.”⁷⁶ For Barth, Bromiley writes,

God is the one personal God in the three essentially and ineffaceably distinctive modes of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These “modes” are not parts or departments of deity, nor are they divine attributes, for the attributes of God are the attributes of each of the modes and each of the modes is essentially God in

⁷¹ *CD* I/1-9, 358.

⁷² *CD* I/1-9, 359.

⁷³ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 77.

⁷⁴ Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervon, 2006), 281.

⁷⁵ *CD* I/1-10, 394.

⁷⁶ *CD* I/1-9, 362.

unity and distinction Father, Son, and Spirit are three modes of being of the one God subsisting in their relationships one with another.⁷⁷

As such, Barth's idea of "modes of being" is meant to maintain the "distinctive genetic relations" of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.⁷⁸ The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are the manifestation of one God in threefold repetitions sharing undivided divine essence and mission in history. The eternal God is the God who reveals himself as one God, one Lord, and one personal God in the mode of the Father, in the mode of the Son, and in the mode of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁹ For Barth, as McCormack says, the idea of Triunity reflects the nature of difference, fellowship, and "participation of each mode of being in by other modes of being," thereby affirming that "the one God is known only in the Three and the Three only with the one God."⁸⁰ God is one Subject in three "modes of being."⁸¹ The indivisible nature of the life and work of the triune God is affirmed.

Barth names the Father the Revealer, the Son the Revelation, and the Spirit Revealed-ness without confusing or separating one from other divine persons.⁸² Meanwhile, he presents the Father as Self-veiling (holiness), the Son as Self-unveiling (mercy) and the Spirit as Self-impartation (love) to humans.⁸³ God is "the One who speaks and acts as Father, Son, and Spirit, in self-veiling, self-unveiling and self-

⁷⁷ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 16.

⁷⁸ *CD* I/1-9, 363.

⁷⁹ *CD* I/1-9, 359.

⁸⁰ *CD* I/1-9, 370.

⁸¹ McCormack, "Trinity," 240.

⁸² *CD* I/1-9, 363.

⁸³ *CD* I/1-9, 380.

imparting, in holiness, mercy and love.”⁸⁴ In the words of Lois Malcolm, Barth “uses the grammatical relations of subject, predicate, and object to express this idea. As subject, God is the revealer who reveals Godself. As predicate, this God reveals Godself through Godself As object, the effect of this revelation is that God reveals Godself.”⁸⁵ God wills to be our God, meets us and unites him to us as Father, Son, and Spirit, which is his eternal essence or mode of being.⁸⁶ When defining Father, Son and Holy Spirit as assuming different roles, Barth holds that they are manifestations of the one and shared mission of one God. He says, “All three persons are involved in each of God’s external works, because God Himself is totally present in all His eternal works The external works of the Trinity are indivisible.”⁸⁷ The revelation of one God in his three modes of being speaks of God’s act of embracing humanity whom he created, wills to reconcile to him, and to redeem from sinful way of life. Our interaction with the self-revelation of the eternal God in his three modes of being assures us that God wills to reconcile us to him and to redeem us from sin.

Thus far, we have seen that Barth described the Triunity of God on the basis of how the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are known as sharing one divine essence and performing the undivided divine mission that seeks fellowship with humanity. A fuller

⁸⁴ *CD* I/1-9, 382.

⁸⁵ Lois E. Malcolm, *Divine Mystery and Human Freedom: A Study of Karl Barth and Karl Rahner* (PhD Thesis: University of Chicago, 1998), 154.

⁸⁶ *CD* I/1-9, 383.

⁸⁷ George Hunsinger, “Karl Barth’s Doctrine of the Trinity, and Some Protestant Doctrines after Barth,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, edited by Gilles Emery, O.P. and Matthew Levering (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 302.

picture of Barth's doctrine of the Trinity is expected to emerge as we move along in exploring in more detail how Barth speaks of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

God the Father

Barth defines God the Father as the Creator and the real Lord of our existence. For Barth, "The one God reveal Himself according to Scripture as the Creator, that is as the Lord of our existence. As such He is God our Father because He is so antecedently in Himself as the Father of the Son."⁸⁸ We find the Father being attested in the Scripture as the One revealed in Jesus Christ who shows him to us as the Father.⁸⁹ When Jesus reveals him to us, Barth says, God the Father was "He whose will was done on Golgotha when in and with Jesus Christ the life of all of us was nailed to the cross and died in order that thereby and therein eternal life might be manifest—He is what the concept of Creator signifies."⁹⁰ In explaining the role of God the Father as originating and preserving life, Barth says, "The life that His will creates will be a life that has passed through death, that is risen from death; it will be eternal life, truly a new birth."⁹¹ Therefore, the being of God the Father is defined as the Creator who gives us life and is Lord of our existence.

The identity of God the Father is associated with an "eternal mode of being of the divine essence."⁹² When he describes the nature of God the Father as the eternal reality of God, Barth is fully aware that God the Father is not to be viewed as ontologically

⁸⁸ *CD* I/1-10, 384.

⁸⁹ *CD* I/1-10, 389.

⁹⁰ *CD* I/1-10.

⁹¹ *CD* I/1-10, 388.

⁹² *CD* I/1-10, 390.

antecedent or prior in terms of the divine essence. As he speaks of the Father in the first place while locating the Son and the Spirit in second and third positions, Barth makes it clear that this does not imply the idea of divine hierarchy or subordinationism. The Father becomes Father not because his divinity is higher than that of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Rather, “God is Father by virtue of his eternal relation to the Son.”⁹³ Barth says, “The divine essence would not be the divine essence, if in it there were superiority and inferiority and also, then, various quanta of deity.”⁹⁴ By way of emphasizing that the logical priority of God the Father does not necessarily imply superiority in terms of the divine essence, Barth clarifies that the Son and the Spirit are of one essence with the Father, further claiming that “in this unity of the divine essence the Son is from the Father and the Spirit is from the Father and the Son, while the Father is from Himself alone.”⁹⁵ That said, God the Father is not seen as dominating the deities of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Barth is but mindful of the distinct identity and role of God the Father when he argues that “God’s trinitarian name of Father, God’s eternal fatherhood, denotes the mode of being of God in which He is the Author of His other modes of being.”⁹⁶

Barth’s treatment of the nature of God the Father also indicates his concern for protecting the eternal identity of God the Father. As part of keeping the eternal nature of God the Father from being confused with other divine persons, Barth expresses that the identity of God the Father is rooted in “the eternity of the fellowship of the Father with the Son and the Spirit” and that it should be protected from being fused with the Son and

⁹³ Hunsinger, “Karl Barth’s Doctrine of the Trinity,” 304.

⁹⁴ *CD* I/1-10, 393.

⁹⁵ *CD* I/1-10.

⁹⁶ *CD* I/1-10.

the Spirit.⁹⁷ For Barth, “God is the eternal Father inasmuch as from eternity and in eternity He is the Father of the Son who from eternity and in eternity participates in the same essence with Him.”⁹⁸ But the identity of God the Father is inseparable from his ontological relationship with the Son and the Holy Spirit. According to Barth, “We cannot call God the Father apart from the Son and the Spirit, nor can we call the Son Savior or the Spirit Comforter without also having the Father in view in both cases.”⁹⁹ In explaining the interrelation of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as one God, Barth says,

Not the Father alone, then, is God the Creator, but also the Son and the Spirit with Him. And the Father is not only God the Creator, but with the Son and the Spirit He is also God the Reconciler and God the Redeemer Because God is the eternal Father as the Father of the Son, and with Him the origin of the Spirit, therefore the God who acts in reconciliation and redemption, and who reveals Himself as the Reconciler and the Redeemer, cannot be a second and third God or a second and third part of God; He is and remains God in His work as in His essence.¹⁰⁰

In short, when he mentions God the Father as the Creator, Barth always strives to dispel the misconception that God the Father is ontologically prior or superior to God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Meanwhile, he also attempts to denote that God the Father is the loving and gracious Creator God who is filled with his love for the Son and who discloses his love for the world through the Son in the Holy Spirit. Even as the role of God the Father is not as explicitly apparent as of the Son, the identity of God the Father is eternally fundamental to the Trinity in which he is known as the loving Father who, in freedom, turns to and embraces humanity through the Son in the Holy Spirit.

⁹⁷ *CD I/1-10*, 397.

⁹⁸ *CD I/1-10*, 394.

⁹⁹ *CD I/1-10*, 395.

¹⁰⁰ *CD I/1-10*.

God the Son

Rinse H. R. Brouwer claims that “Throughout his life as a Christian and his work as a theologian it was Karl Barth’s intention to be a witness of Jesus Christ and to confess his lordship.”¹⁰¹ The previous chapter basically presented how Barth was committed to bearing witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout his theological career. In this section, we will observe how Barth discusses the identity of God the Son, especially how the life of God the Son represents God’s complete identification with humanity in history.

Analyzing Barth’s theology, Nixon de Vera states that “The essential life of the triune being is made concrete in the life of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰² Clearly, the life of Jesus Christ stands as the starting point for knowing how the triune God embraces humanity in history. In and through Jesus Christ, Barth argues, the triune God “turns to us, speaks with us, and wills to be heard by us and awakens our response.”¹⁰³ Depicting the Son in the divine act of establishing a new relationship between God and us, Barth says, “God the Son embraces us as His creatures, seeks us and converses with us He deals with us as the Creator, but as a person with persons, not as a power with things.”¹⁰⁴ He is God who “reconciles us to Himself, comes to us, and speaks with us.”¹⁰⁵ Meanwhile, Barth comes to preserve the identity of the Son by saying that “the Reconciler is not the Creator” while presenting him as the one who follows God the Father and who

¹⁰¹ Rinse H. Reeling Brouwer, “Jesus Christ,” *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, edited by Paul T. Nimmo and Paul Dafydd (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 277.

¹⁰² Nixon de Vera, *The Suffering of God in the Eternal Decree: A Critical Study of Karl Barth on Election* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2020), 66-67.

¹⁰³ *CD I/1-11*, 407.

¹⁰⁴ *CD I/1-11*.

¹⁰⁵ *CD I/1-11*, 413.

accomplishes creation as a second divine act.¹⁰⁶ Jesus Christ stands to God the Father “in the irreversible relation of following on Him and from Him as the son follows on the father and from the father and the word follows on the speaker and from the speaker.”¹⁰⁷

For Barth, the deity of Jesus Christ is eternally grounded, not contingently conditioned. Barth’s emphasis on the eternal deity of Jesus Christ is most recognizable when he says that he is the “One who reveals the Father and the One who reconciles us to the Father.”¹⁰⁸ Highlighting the inseparable relation between the Father and the Son, Barth states, “Only in the One who acts on us as the Reconciler through the cross and resurrection could we perceive the Creator, and only in the Creator who remains the Lord of our being in spite of our enmity can we perceive the Reconciler.”¹⁰⁹ Here, Barth discloses that the deity of Jesus Christ is not determined by the fact that he has come to be known as the Revealer and the Reconciler. “Revelation and reconciliation do not create His deity. His deity creates revelation and reconciliation.”¹¹⁰ The Son, as already said, is therefore seen as being equal with the Father in terms of his deity or divine essence. Barth states, “He is antecedently in Himself light of light, very God of very God, the begotten God and not His creature.”¹¹¹ Reclaiming how the Son is related to the Father, Barth says, “Jesus Christ as one mode of being in God is related to the first mode of being in which it is grounded and from which it proceeds, in the same manner as

¹⁰⁶ *CD* I/1-11.

¹⁰⁷ *CD* I/1-11.

¹⁰⁸ *CD* I/1-11, 414-15.

¹⁰⁹ *CD* I/1-11, 413.

¹¹⁰ *CD* I/1-11, 415.

¹¹¹ *CD* I/1-11, 428.

sunlight is to the sun.”¹¹² As the begotten Son of the eternal Father, Jesus meets us as the Revealer of God and the Reconciler to God.¹¹³ In the face of the modern culture in which Jesus Christ was viewed as the model of an idealist human being, Barth defended the deity of Jesus Christ in such a way that he is God’s mode of being, bringing forth from “a source which is real in God Himself.”¹¹⁴ Meanwhile, he portrays Jesus Christ as the God who owes love to God the Father for his existence and who lives in the indestructible fellowship with the Father.¹¹⁵ In testifying how God is embodied in Jesus Christ, Barth states, “The material point in the New Testament texts is that *God* is found in Jesus because in fact Jesus Himself cannot be found as any other than God. And God is found in *Jesus* because in fact He is not found anywhere else but in Jesus, yet He is in fact found in Him.”¹¹⁶ The basic argument Barth wants to offer here is that Jesus Christ is the One who brings the reconciling love of God to the human world. All in all, Barth emphasizes that the life of the Son expresses the heart of God the Father who wills to reconcile humans to him and to bring them into the eternal fellowship with him.

Barth’s idea of how Jesus Christ embodies God’s actual embracing of humanity is more noticeable when it comes to the doctrine of election (CDII/2). Affirming election as the full manifestation of God’s determination for humanity in love, Barth says,

God in His love elects another to fellowship with Himself He ordains that He should not be entirely self-sufficient as He might be. He determines for Himself

¹¹²CD I/1-11, 429.

¹¹³CD I/1-11, 430.

¹¹⁴CD I/1-11, 433.

¹¹⁵CD I/1-11, 432.

¹¹⁶ CD I/1-11, 405.

that overflowing, that movement, that condescension. He constitutes Himself as benefit or favor. And in so doing He elects another as the object of His love.¹¹⁷

Barth continues to argue that,

He is the election of God before which and without which and beside which God cannot make any other choices. Before Him and without Him and beside Him God does not, then, elect or will anything. And He is the election of the free grace of God. For it is God's free grace that in Him He elects to be man and to have dealings with man and to join Himself to man. He, Jesus Christ, is the free grace of God as not content simply to remain identical with the inward and eternal being of God, but operating *ad extra* in the ways and works of God.¹¹⁸

In general, Barth clarifies that Jesus Christ is the election of the eternal God who in his freedom determines himself for submerging in his relationship to the universe. The election of Jesus Christ thus declares the full disclosure of "God willing and affirming and confirming Himself."¹¹⁹ As part of preserving the eternal Sonship of Jesus, Barth writes, "The Son of God determined to give Himself from all eternity This Son of Man was from all eternity the object of the election of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And the reality of this eternal being together of God and man is a concrete decree. It has as its content one name and one person. This decree is Jesus Christ."¹²⁰ In Jesus Christ, Barth asserts, God sets "to elect and predestinate Himself to fellowship with man, and quite another for God to predestinate man to fellowship with Himself."¹²¹ Accordingly, Barth makes it clear that when God elected fellowship with man he elected our rejection and

¹¹⁷ CD II/1-33, 11.

¹¹⁸ CD II/1-33, 95.

¹¹⁹ CD II/1-33, 156.

¹²⁰ CD II/1-33, 158-59.

¹²¹ CD II/1-33, 163.

our suffering. He elected it as his own suffering.¹²² The election of Jesus Christ declares that from all eternity the triune God demonstrates and maintains himself by exercising his sovereign freedom for giving himself to and sharing his love with humanity.¹²³ Looking at the role of freedom with respect to the election of Jesus, we see that the freedom of God is a freedom in favor of humanity, which decrees God's willing, affirming, and loving humanity.¹²⁴ This freedom is a freedom to love, by which "God sacrifices his divinity to effect solidarity with humanity."¹²⁵ For Barth, "God's freedom is essentially not freedom *from*, but freedom *to* and *for*."¹²⁶ Thus, the election of Jesus Christ fully demonstrates how the eternal God exercises his freedom in actualizing his determination for humanity.

A fuller understanding of how God the Son identifies humanity is visible when it comes to the doctrine of reconciliation (CDIV/1). In this place, Barth continues to describe Jesus Christ as embodying "the loving God who actively seeks and creates fellowship with human and all creation."¹²⁷ In so doing, he portrays Jesus Christ as taking up suffering and embodying in him the plight of humanity.¹²⁸ In Jesus Christ, Barth states, "God has linked and bound and pledged Himself originally to man, choosing and

¹²² CD II/1-33, 165.

¹²³ CD II/1-33, 175.

¹²⁴ de Vera, *The Suffering of God in the Eternal Decree*, 75.

¹²⁵ de Vera, 93.

¹²⁶ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 72.

¹²⁷ Peter Goodwin Heltzel and Christian T. Collins Winn, "Karl Barth, Reconciliation, and the Triune God," *The Cambridge Companion to The Trinity*, edited by Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: University Press, 2011), 177.

¹²⁸ CD IV/3-69, 66.

determining and making Himself the God of man.”¹²⁹ By imparting himself into human history, the eternal God is seen to “live in terms of our common humanity.”¹³⁰ The eternal God now encounters us, speaks with us, and address us “in terms of I and Thou.”¹³¹ The reconciling act of God, embodied in the life of the Son, overcomes and destroys man’s distance from God.¹³² In commenting Barth’s concept of how Jesus Christ identifies with our humanity, Hunsinger argues, “It is essentially his person and not the law, his compassion, not his vicarious punishment, that determines his saving significance. He completely embraces our destruction, carrying us to death in his death, that we might be raised in and with him to newness of life.”¹³³ Humanity is now fully embraced into relationship with the triune God. “In being gracious to man in Jesus Christ,” Barth argues, “God acknowledges man; he accepts responsibility for his being and nature. He remains Himself. He does not cease to be God. But He does not hold aloof. In being gracious to man in Jesus Christ, He also goes into the far country, into the evil society of this being which is not God and against God. He does not shrink from him.”¹³⁴ Jesus Christ becomes “a suffering servant who wills this profoundly unsatisfactory being, who cannot will anything other than in the obedience in which He shows Himself the Son of God.”¹³⁵ The gracious God enters into the condition of

¹²⁹ *CD IV/3-69*, 38

¹³⁰ *CD IV/3-69*, 106.

¹³¹ *CD IV/3-69*, 83.

¹³² *CD IV/3-69*, 183.

¹³³ George Hunsinger, “Karl Barth’s Christology: Its Basic Chalcedon Character,” *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, edited by John Webster (Cambridge: University Press, 2000), 137.

¹³⁴ *CD IV/3-69*, 159.

¹³⁵ *CD IV/3-69*, 165.

suffering and humiliation. As Barth writes, “The humility in which he dwells and acts in Jesus Christ is not alien to Him, but proper to Him It is His sovereign grace that He wills to be and is amongst us in humility, our God, God for us In the condescension in which He gives Himself to us in Jesus Christ He exists and speaks and acts as the One He was from all eternity and will be to all eternity.”¹³⁶ God is now seen in the concrete act of turning toward humanity as God who loves in freedom. In his freedom, Barth says,

God chooses condescension. He chooses humiliation, lowliness and obedience. In this way, He illuminates the darkness, opening up that which is closed. In this way He brings help where there is no help. In this way He accepts solidarity with the creature, with man, in order to reconcile man and the world with Himself, in order to convert man and the world to Himself.¹³⁷

Therefore, the way that the Son of God chooses is one that leads “into the far country, i.e., into the lowliness of creaturely being, of being as man, into unity and solidarity with sinful and therefore perishing humanity, the way of His incarnation is as such the activation, the demonstration, the revelation of His deity.”¹³⁸ By taking up the way of humiliation the Son of God draws near to us and becomes one of us. This is the concrete divine drama where we see God allowing the world and humanity to take part in the history of the inner life of his Godhead.¹³⁹ The Son of God in his self-humiliation entered into a full solidarity with us. He entered into our world where he experienced thirst, hunger, and affliction. He suffered death on the cross.¹⁴⁰ Jesus Christ is the Judge who is judged on behalf of sinful and perishing humanity. For Barth, “The suffering and death of

¹³⁶ *CD IV/3-69*, 193.

¹³⁷ *CD IV/3-69*, 199.

¹³⁸ *CD IV/3-69*, 211.

¹³⁹ *CD IV/3-69*, 215.

¹⁴⁰ *CD IV/3-69*, 215-16.

Jesus Christ are the No of God in and with which He again takes up and asserts in man's space and time the Yes to man which He has determined and pronounced in eternity."¹⁴¹ Thus, the life of Jesus Christ perfectly embodies real encounter between God and human.

God the Holy Spirit

As indicated earlier, Barth mentions the Holy Spirit as God the Redeemer along with the Father, who is identified as the Creator and the Son as the Reconciler. The Holy Spirit is the one God who "reveals Himself according to the Scripture as the Redeemer, i.e., as the Lord who sets us free He is the Holy Spirit, by receiving whom we become the children of God, because, as the Spirit of the love of God the Father and the Son, He is antecedently in Himself."¹⁴² Describing the Holy Spirit as the eternal God and Lord who redeems us and sets us free, Barth argues that he is God's presence in the human life. In saying how the Holy Spirit interacts with humans, Barth explains,

In both the Old Testament and the New, the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit is very generally God Himself to the degree that in an incomprehensibly real way, without on this account being any the less God, He can be present to the creature, and in virtue of this presence of His effect the relation of the creature to Himself, and in virtue of this relation to Himself grant the creature life.¹⁴³

As fully God the Holy Spirit creates relation between God and humans, helping the latter to receive the revelation of God.¹⁴⁴ Thus, the Holy Spirit is responsible for preparing human's heart to receive the revelation of God. In Barth's view, "The Holy Spirit is the authorization to speak about Christ; he is the equipment of the prophet and apostle; He is

¹⁴¹ *CD IV/3-69*, 257.

¹⁴² *CD I/1-12*, 448.

¹⁴³ *CD I/1-12*, 450.

¹⁴⁴ *CD I/1-12*.

the summons to the Church to minister the Word.”¹⁴⁵ The Holy Spirit is the Lord who sets us free to become the children of God.¹⁴⁶ The work of the Holy Spirit is discerned as being redemptive in that it initially prepares humans to turn freely to God.

When Barth speaks of the redemptive mission of the Holy Spirit in God’s revelation, he keeps in mind that the deity of the Holy Spirit is equal to that of the Father and the Son. For him, “The Holy Spirit is no less and no other than God Himself, distinct from Him whom Jesus calls His Father, distinct also from Jesus Christ Himself, yet not less than the Father, and no less than Jesus, God Himself, altogether.”¹⁴⁷ Being a part of the eternal divine mission, the Holy Spirit has his own divine identity distinct from the Father and the Son. Barth says, “The Holy Spirit lords over every creature but is not lorded over. He deifies but is not deified. He fills but is not filled. He causes to participate but does not participate. He sanctifies but is not sanctified.”¹⁴⁸ The Spirit remains the Lord when he comes into human hearts as God’s own gift and fills humans’ lives and when he intercedes for us to God on our behalf.¹⁴⁹ Known as the equal bearer of the Lordship of God together with the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is “The one sovereign divine Subject, the Subject who is not placed under the control or inspection of any other, who derives His being and existence from Himself.”¹⁵⁰ When highlighting the eternal deity of the Holy Spirit, Barth affirms that he is the eternal Spirit and that he

¹⁴⁵ *CD I/1-12*, 455.

¹⁴⁶ *CD I/1-12*, 456.

¹⁴⁷ *CD I/1-12*, 459.

¹⁴⁸ *CD I/1-12*, 464.

¹⁴⁹ *CD I/1-12*, 465.

¹⁵⁰ *CD I/1-12*, 469.

belongs to the Father and the Son. Meanwhile, Barth is mindful that the Holy Spirit plays the subjective role in the whole process of divine revelation. In what follows, we will see how Barth comes to speak of the Holy Spirit as the subjective reality of revelation.

In describing the role of the Holy Spirit as the subjective reality of revelation, Barth holds that the Holy Spirit enlightens the mind of humanity in order to appropriate the revelation of God. For Barth, “God’s freedom to be present in this way to man, and therefore to bring about this encounter, is the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit in God’s revelation. The Holy Spirit is not identical with Jesus Christ, with the Son or Word of God.”¹⁵¹ Being at work in human life, Barth asserts, “The Holy Spirit guarantees man what he cannot guarantee himself, his personal participation in revelation. The act of the Holy Ghost in revelation is the Yes to God’s Word which is spoken by God Himself for us, yet not just to us, but also in us.”¹⁵² As Barth portrays the Spirit as communicating the revelation of God in a subjective way, he defines the nature of God’s revelation in two senses—objective and subjective. For him, our knowledge of God through his revelation in Jesus Christ is named the objective revelation of God, which basically gives us the understanding of how the eternal God reaches human.¹⁵³ But it is through the Holy Spirit who plays the subjective role in the process that the objective revelation of God becomes understandable, visible, and discernible to human mind. Barth says, “God’s revelation in its subjective reality is the person and work of the Holy Spirit, i.e., the person and work of God Himself.”¹⁵⁴ The objective reality of revelation becomes a subjective reality for us

¹⁵¹ *CD* I/1-12, 450.

¹⁵² *CD* I/1-12, 454.

¹⁵³ *CD* I/2-16, 232.

¹⁵⁴ *CD* I/2-16, 232-33.

through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵⁵ Analyzing Barth's view of the Holy Spirit in this regard John Thompson says that "The Spirit is God in us opening up our lives to know his Word in Jesus Christ and bringing that effectively to us. The Spirit is both the subjective reality and agent of divine revelation."¹⁵⁶ At the same time, Barth is fully aware that the Holy Spirit never works independently from the Spirit when the Spirit is said to be responsible for communicating God's revelation in a subjective way. Barth says, "The Holy Spirit certainly comes to us, not by an independent road which bypasses the Word and its testimonies, but by the Word and its testimonies."¹⁵⁷ At this point, he makes it clear that the Holy Spirit is eternally dependent on Jesus Christ whom the former introduces and communicates to us. In his analysis of Barth's view of the Holy Spirit, Thompson continues to assert, "The Holy Spirit performs no separate work but this distinctive work which is also the indivisible work of the whole Trinity."¹⁵⁸ In retelling Barth's view of the Holy Spirit in connection with the reconciling mission of Jesus Christ, Hunsinger contends, "In no sense that would be independent, supplemental, or superior does the Spirit's activity every focus on itself, for in the economy of salvation the Spirit serves the reconciliation accomplished by Christ from beginning to end."¹⁵⁹ As

¹⁵⁵ CD I/2-16, 233.

¹⁵⁶ John Thompson, *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1991), 25.

¹⁵⁷ CD I/2-16, 236.

¹⁵⁸ Thompson, *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 160.

¹⁵⁹ George Hunsinger, "The Mediator of Communion: Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Holy Spirit," *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, edited by John Webster (Cambridge: The University Press, 2000), 182.

such, all that the Spirit does in actualizing the subjective revelation of God is to re-present and fulfill the objective revelation of God known in Jesus Christ. Barth states,

We must remember that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and also of the Son. He is not a Spirit side by side with the Word. He is the Spirit of the Word itself who brings to our ears the Word and nothing but the Word. Subjective revelation can be only the repetition, the impress, the sealing of objective revelation upon us.¹⁶⁰

In this process, the Holy Spirit directs the hearts of human beings to the revelation of God. The Holy Spirit, Barth says, “draws and takes us right into the reality of revelation by doing what we cannot do, by opening our eyes and ears and hearts, He does not tell us anything except that we are in Christ by Christ.”¹⁶¹ By introducing us to the Word of God the Holy Spirit gives us the freedom to become the children of God so that we may be able to love and praise him in his revelation.¹⁶² When the Holy Spirit subjectively communicates God’s revelation to us, he makes us free to take heart to what we know about God in Christ. For Barth, “It is real in the Holy Spirit that we are free for God.”¹⁶³ We are able to recognize God’s Word as the Truth when the Holy Spirit makes instruction for us.¹⁶⁴ We are able to know and accept God’s Word when the Holy Spirit makes us free inwardly to say “yes” to God’s Word. “Apart from the reality of the Holy Spirit we are not free for God.”¹⁶⁵ In short, the Holy Spirit is God who gives us the knowledge of God and lets us know God who is revealed in Christ. As the Holy Spirit

¹⁶⁰ *CD I/2-16*, 239.

¹⁶¹ *CD I/2-16*, 242.

¹⁶² *CD I/2-16*, 203.

¹⁶³ *CD I/2-16*, 243.

¹⁶⁴ *CD I/2-16*, 244.

¹⁶⁵ *CD I/2-16*.

makes the possibility of our freedom for God, we can say “yes” to God’s Word, put our faith in God, and love God as our Lord. “By the outpouring of the Holy Spirit,” Barth clarifies, “it is possible for God’s revelation to reach man in his freedom, because in it the Word of God is brought to his hearing.”¹⁶⁶ The outpouring of the Holy Spirit thus creates the possibility of freedom through which God’s revelation meets humans,¹⁶⁷ or humans can be met by God’s revelation.¹⁶⁸ By inaugurating freedom in our life, the Spirit restores in us the life of a new relationship with God. Barth argues,

The Holy Spirit puts God on the one side and man on the other. And then He calls this God our Father and man the child of this Father. He brings God straight to those eyes and ears and hearts of ours which are so utterly unfitted for Him. And He takes us straight to the reality of God’s action, the God who so utterly does not need us.¹⁶⁹

The Holy Spirit places God and humans together whereby the Spirit brings God to be discerned, heard, and known by humans. “In the Holy Spirit,” Barth says, “we know the real togetherness of God and man.”¹⁷⁰ In other words, it is through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that “a direct confrontation of the whole man by God” is possible.¹⁷¹ The Holy Spirit now enables us to begin our new life as the children of God, to live in relationship with God, to know God’s Word, and to apprehend God’s revelation.¹⁷² In analyzing Barth’s emphasis on how the Holy Spirit unites God and humans, Peter S. Oh

¹⁶⁶ *CD* I/2-16, 246.

¹⁶⁷ *CD* I/2-16, 257.

¹⁶⁸ *CD* I/2-16, 265.

¹⁶⁹ *CD* I/2-16, 245.

¹⁷⁰ *CD* I/2-16, 246.

¹⁷¹ *CD* I/2-16, 267.

¹⁷² *CD* I/2-16, 272.

says, “Through the *Holy Spirit*, Jesus and man are united in the same manner that the Father is united with the Son. Through the *Holy Spirit*, man as a new creature can participate and dwells in the nature of God without changing or losing his creaturely nature that is renewed in Him.”¹⁷³ When the Spirit unites believers with Christ through whom they have access to participation in the eternal communion with the Holy Trinity, they also find communion with one another.¹⁷⁴ The Holy Spirit now brings us into relationship with God and gathers us together as one community in which we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and embrace one another in love. When we say that the love of God frees us from sin and creates us anew, we affirm that it is the Holy Spirit enlivening this love in us, and changing the course of our life.¹⁷⁵ Barth insists, “we are newly created and enlightened and called and taught and impelled by the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷⁶ In reiterating how Barth states the Holy Spirit as the source of transformation in life, Oh states,

In the freedom given in the baptism of the Holy Spirit, man exists as a newly generated and transformed being. Here, freedom is indispensable to man’s becoming a new being in the midst of sinful, depraved circumstances. In the divinely given freedom, he is liberated from his old sinful and depraved nature and transformed into an authentic, real person in communion with the Lord in the Holy Spirit. Through this divinely wrought change, his self-determining action becomes solely moral action even though it was initiated and made possible with the aid of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷⁷

In revitalizing the love of God in us, the Holy Spirit transforms, liberates, and empowers us to love God and other people around us. When the Holy Spirit effects change in us by

¹⁷³ Peter S. Oh, *Karl Barth’s Trinitarian Theology: A Study in Karl Barth’s Analogical Use of The Trinitarian Relation* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 150.

¹⁷⁴ Hunsinger, “The Mediator of Communion: Karl Barth’s Doctrine of the Holy Spirit,” 187.

¹⁷⁵ *CD IV/1-68*, 787.

¹⁷⁶ *CD IV/1-68*.

¹⁷⁷ Oh, *Karl Barth’s Trinitarian Theology*, 131.

producing faith in our life, that faith impacts our whole activity, existence, inner and outward life as believers.¹⁷⁸ In all these, the Holy Spirit is experienced as God the Redeemer who inspires hope in our wearied lives and sustains our faith in God to be able to love him and remain faithful and strong in our ongoing life. For Barth, “A life lived through the Holy Spirit becomes a life lived in hope.”¹⁷⁹ The hope that the Holy Spirit awakens, sustains, and illumines in us is the power for us to live faithfully as Christians.

Contemporary Responses

Throughout his description of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit Barth is committed to claiming that the self-revelation of God in history reflects the eternal nature of God who wills and determines himself to be in relationship with humanity in its existential context. The picture of communion and fellowship in God’s inner life as well as God’s act of seeking fellowship with humanity in time is fully embodied in Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity. The divine persons are ontologically interrelated and mutually interdependent as they assume the one and undivided mission of creation, reconciliation, and redemption in history. Seeing Barth as utilizing the patristic concept of *homoousia* and *perichoresis*, Heltzel and Winn argue that the idea of mutual indwelling characterizes Barth’s view of the nature of the divine relations and the divine life.¹⁸⁰ The structure of his Trinitarian theology rests on this fundamental fact that “God is a communion of love in which the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit subsist in their mutual indwelling

¹⁷⁸ Karl Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life: The Theological Basis of Ethics*, translated by R. Birch Holyle (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 36.

¹⁷⁹ Barth, 64.

¹⁸⁰ Heltzel and Winn, “Karl Barth, Reconciliation, and the Triune God,” 176.

relations.”¹⁸¹ The inner fellowship of the triune God is identified when this God embraces and elects humans for an eternal fellowship with him. God is “the loving Lord who actively seeks and creates fellowship with humanity and all creation.”¹⁸² For Torrance, Barth’s concept of the Trinity “constitutes the essential grammar of God’s engagement with humanity and theological objectivity.”¹⁸³ Barth’s Trinitarian model, he argues, “truly speaks of an event of God’s taking humanity to participate in the communion between the Father and the Son.”¹⁸⁴ Looking at Barth’s view in the context of how the triune God presents himself to be known, experienced, and acknowledged by humans, we discern that Barth focuses on how the triune God elects humans for the eternal fellowship with him.¹⁸⁵ Veli-Matti Karkkainen also claims that in Barth’s Trinity “there is both inner-Trinitarian love and the desire for the Triune God to create fellowship with humans.”¹⁸⁶ Such an approach is seen in the words of Robert W. Jensen, who describes Barth’s Trinitarian view as presenting God’s loving involvement with humanity in the manner of introducing personally to us and naming himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹⁸⁷ Jensen remarks, “God seeks community with us, and does so in that he as

¹⁸¹ Heltzel and Winn.

¹⁸² Heltzel and Winn, 177.

¹⁸³ Torrance, “The Trinity,” 76.

¹⁸⁴ Torrance, 79.

¹⁸⁵ Torrance, 72-73.

¹⁸⁶ Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 72.

¹⁸⁷ Robert W. Jensen, “Karl Barth on the Being of God,” *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: An Unofficial Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*, edited by Bruce L. McCormack and Thomas Joseph White, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 49.

Father, Son, and Spirit has community in himself.”¹⁸⁸ For Oh, the community that the triune God builds with us is what we experience in the church that finds its life in Jesus Christ and grows into the culture of love and mutuality through the Spirit who binds all members together.¹⁸⁹ In stating how Barth epitomizes God’s self-identification with us, William Stacy Johnson argues that “God has created us, is reconciling us, and is moving us toward redemption. In all three aspects of this unfolding drama, we are continually learning more of who God is.”¹⁹⁰ The implication of Barth’s Trinitarian theology, therefore, affirms that the triune God seeks fellowship with humanity in its historical world. Because of what the triune God has done for it, humanity now experiences being reconciled to God, redeemed from sin, and restored to fellowship with the triune God.

The Role of Freedom

Looking back to the nature of the debates based on our study of how Barth envisions the role of divine freedom in his Trinitarian theology, we may conclude that Barth is more concerned for spelling out how God exercises his freedom as the triune God for encountering human in love than pondering over how the exercise of this freedom might have led to some sort of ontological constitution in God’s being. Such an outcome would rule that McCormack’s tendency to portray freedom as the cause of the self-constitution of God is less expressed in Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity that focuses more on how the loving God exercises his freedom to become God for us as the triune God, which Barth considers as the eternal nature of God. While we tend to agree that the

¹⁸⁸ Jensen, 49.

¹⁸⁹ Oh, *Karl Barth’s Trinitarian Theology*, 90.

¹⁹⁰ William Stacy Johnson, *The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology*: Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 56.

approach taken by Molnar and Hunsinger bear more faithfulness to the implication of Barth's view, we but need to be aware that such approach could invite irrelevant criticisms like that of Will Fredstrom, who says, "Barth emphasizes God's freedom in terms of transcendence *from* humanity."¹⁹¹ If we are serious enough for preventing Barth's idea of freedom from being conceived as God's distance from humanity, we cannot ignore McCormack's move, for it helps us to see that the being of God cannot be separated from his decision to act in human life. For Barth, the triune God is always in the act of accomplishing his divine mission in human history, which he wills to execute in his freedom. The freedom of God in Barth's analysis, Ngun Cer Chin argues, "could not be spoken of apart from the presupposition and the history of God's dealing with man. God is man's God."¹⁹² This freedom is seen in God's togetherness with human.¹⁹³

Along the process, Barth engages the concept of freedom as the perfections of God. In this respect, the idea of the freedom of God has both negative and positive implications. The negative aspect of this freedom expresses that in his freedom God is not bound by any limits, restrictions, or conditions.¹⁹⁴ The freedom of God is his majesty and sovereign power.¹⁹⁵ The idea of God's freedom, at this point, affirms that God is wholly transcendent, and is separated from all that is creaturely or free from all eternal conditions. However, as Malcolm argues, the positive dimension of its meaning expresses

¹⁹¹ Will Fredstrom, "Bonhoeffer's *Stellvertretung*: A Christ-Like Ecclesial Ethic for Serving "Galilean" Neighbors," *Word & World* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2023): 168.

¹⁹² Ngun Cer Chin, *Baptism in the Theology of Karl Barth in Biblical and Ecumenical Context* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2022), 76.

¹⁹³ Chin, 77.

¹⁹⁴ Malcolm, *Divine Mystery and Human Freedom*, 231.

¹⁹⁵ *CD* II/1-31, 2.

that “God’s freedom . . . is not merely a freedom to be in differentiation from others but a freedom to have and hold community with what is utterly distinct from God’s self.”¹⁹⁶ This is the freedom God has in the depths of God’s eternal being which is revealed to us as creator, reconciler, and redeemer.¹⁹⁷ In freedom, God can be immanent, who is “free to achieve a uniquely inward and genuine immanence of God’s being in and with the being which is distinct from God.”¹⁹⁸ That is to say that the freedom of God is gracious by nature.¹⁹⁹ As discussed earlier, how God exercises his freedom is seen in how he proves his existence in his revelation.²⁰⁰ The function of divine freedom is discernible in the drama of the mutual, equal, and perichoretic relation of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, which then is fully disclosed in God’s act of turning to human history. This freedom is God’s personal self-movement. Freedom is the readiness of God to love, which is manifest in the life of God who plunges himself into the world in Jesus Christ.²⁰¹ God is free “to reach out to that which is other than himself and to relate himself to it.”²⁰² For Ian A. McFarland, Barth’s intention is not to promote a theological voluntarism but rather to argue that “God’s freedom is disclosed *in* God’s being for us and therefore is not

¹⁹⁶ Malcolm, *Divine Mystery and Human Freedom*, 232.

¹⁹⁷ Malcolm.

¹⁹⁸ Malcolm, 236.

¹⁹⁹ *CD* III/3-49, 187.

²⁰⁰ *CD* II/1-28, 305.

²⁰¹ Katherine Sonderegger, “God,” *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, edited by Paul Dafydd Jones and Paul T. Nimmo (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 224.

²⁰² George S. Hendry, “The Freedom of God in the Theology of Karl Barth,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 31, no. 3 (June 1978): 234.

to be understood as some ontological reserve lying *behind* that being.”²⁰³ While paying attention to the transcendence and sovereignty of the freedom of God, Barth always holds that God in his freedom wills to be gracious, loving, and compassionate toward humanity. The wholly other, transcendent and non-worldly God, in freedom, chose, decided, and determined himself to be the God of humanity.²⁰⁴ In turning toward humanity in Christ in freedom, the loving God determines himself to become human and to be in solidarity with human by subjecting himself to the condition of suffering. In God’s becoming something other and lower than himself, God actually exercises and demonstrates divine freedom.²⁰⁵ The free God continues to be with humans through the Holy Spirit who sustains the relation between God and humans. For Barth, Busch writes, God’s freedom is “essentially communicative, committed to solidarity, social freedom, freedom not in competition but rather in coexistence, freedom not at the cost of others but for their benefit, for them and with them.”²⁰⁶ Therefore, God’s freedom is not a kind of freedom that puts God aloft where God stays far from the human world. God’s freedom stands in no way as a barrier to the genuine relatedness with the creature. In his freedom, God is actually present at all times in his relationship with the creature.²⁰⁷ God’s freedom is a freedom by which God wills himself to enter into fellowship with humanity in his

²⁰³ Ian A. McFarland, “Present in Love: Rethinking Barth on the Divine Perfections,” *Modern Theology* 33, no. 2 (April 2017): 246.

²⁰⁴ Chin, *Baptism in the Theology of Karl Barth in Biblical and Ecumenical Context*, 78.

²⁰⁵ Alexander J. McKelway, *The Freedom of God and Human Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 1990, 55.

²⁰⁶ Busch, *The Great Passion*, 115.

²⁰⁷ Justine Stratis, *God’s Being towards Fellowship: Schleiermacher, Barth, and the Meaning of “God Is Love”* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 147.

gracious love. In his freedom, the triune God chooses to be present with humanity and be in solidarity with it in its sociopolitical world. In choosing to become God for us, the triune God sets us free and gives us freedom as a gift for us. For Barth, “Man becomes free and is free by choosing, deciding, and determining himself in accordance with the freedom of God.”²⁰⁸ According to Chin, “Barth’s understanding of the freedom given to man is in no way a freedom to choose what is good or what is bad, nor a freedom to obey or disobey. This is only a freedom to follow after God, to obey God and to be responsible to God.”²⁰⁹ Human freedom is the freedom of joy, obedience, and discipleship.²¹⁰ When we are set free in Christ, we discern that we are free to live for others.²¹¹ Being set free by Christ who takes up our humanity through the redemptive work of the Holy Spirit we are prepared to be thankful to God, be responsive to God’s will, and to live as God’s partner and witness in the world.²¹² Barth says, “The God who made use of His freedom to win for us salvation and liberation in Jesus Christ also wills and creates our preservation in the same freedom and for the same purpose of liberation.”²¹³ Therefore, the freedom that we receive from the triune God is what will determine how we live and struggle for the freedom, liberation, and humanization of oppressed people in our sociopolitical world.

²⁰⁸ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 77.

²⁰⁹ Chin, *Baptism in the Theology of Karl Barth in Biblical and Ecumenical Context*, 89.

²¹⁰ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 78-81.

²¹¹ McKelway, *The Freedom of God and Human Liberation*, 101.

²¹² Barth, *The Humanity of God*, 82.

²¹³ CD III/3-49, 80.

Summary

In this chapter, we noticed that the interpretation of Barth's Trinitarian theology has been widely conducted in the form of debates on the intersection of his doctrine of election and the Trinity. McCormack contends that we should pay attention to how Barth attempted to liberate the Trinity from its metaphysical entanglements, proposing that the nature of divine freedom should be more reflected in our reading of Barth's Trinitarian theology. McCormack hints that our knowledge of how the eternal God exercises his freedom to become God for us—his act in human history—should characterize our interpretation of Barth's doctrine of the Trinity. In response, Molnar and Hunsinger defend that the nature of Barth's doctrine of the immanent Trinity should never be influenced by our interpretation of his concept of the freedom of God. As we looked through his doctrine of the Trinity at a closer step, where Barth speaks of the nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we discovered that Barth appears to reserve room for the immanent Trinity which realization in human history has but to do the function of his freedom. Having said that, there is a clear basis for us to affirm that Barth recognizes the eternal nature of the triune God, who, in freedom, wills and decides to reveal himself into human history as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In this process, Barth maintains the idea of the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, engaging in the single and shared divine mission of recreating, reconciling, and redeeming humanity in its existential world. In seeking fellowship with humanity, the triune God identifies it and stands in solidarity with it. In so doing, the triune God gives the gift of freedom to humanity. This freedom is basically meant for humanity to live freely for God and for the benefit of other humans. The essence of Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom is to be

fully realized when this freedom is seen as that which the triune God exercises for bringing himself into solidarity with humanity, and for redeeming and liberating the latter to be able to live freely, responsibly, and positively for God and for other human beings. Truthfully speaking, our exploration of Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom allows us to affirm that our encounter with the triune God in this Trinitarian setting serves as a liberating and transformative experience for us to live positively for our sociopolitical world. With that in mind, our next chapter will argue how Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom requires the Chin evangelical and ecumenical Christians to achieve a new Trinitarian imagination, which speaks to the sociopolitical context of the Chin.

CHAPTER 6

IMPLICATIONS OF BARTH'S TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY OF FREEDOM FOR CHIN CHRISTIANITY

As discussed in chapter 2, what characterizes the sociopolitical life of the Chin today is nothing other than the rule of military dictatorship swearing to keep hegemonic Burmese nationalism that continues to oppress and dehumanize the Chin and all peoples in Myanmar. It is Christianity, as seen in chapter 3, that played a vital role in shaping the Chin, as they navigated through this challenging political circumstance for decades. Since the time of American missionaries committed to proclaiming the Gospel in a way that addressed the holistic dimension of the life of people, the Chin viewed Christianity as that which protected their ethnic identity from being marred by Burmese nationalist politics and transformed their lives in a substantial way. The role of Chin Christianity today is but seen as less effective in dealing with the real situation of the Chin struggling under this difficult sociopolitical circumstance. No doubt, the fact that the theological function of Chin Christianity today appears to be less capable of engaging the contextual realities of the Chin in a positive way reveals the truth that its evangelical and ecumenical trends cannot well depict how the triune God embraces the Chin or how the triune God transforms and redeems them based on their relationship with him. It is appropriate to contend that the theological failure of Chin evangelicalism and ecumenism at this point has been underlined by their misunderstanding of the Trinity, which causes them to be inattentive to the thought of the indivisible, mutual, and harmonious work of the triune

God in human life. Their inability to understand the Trinity in a proper sense thus causes the Chin to be less aware of how the triune God embraces them in their struggle or how their connection with the triune God shapes their engagement with the sociopolitical world. A constructive Trinitarian hermeneutics for the Chin is but expected to emerge from observing how Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom comes to reshape their Trinitarian misconceptions. As seen in the previous chapter, Barth presents the triune God as being in solidarity with humanity, who exercises his freedom to become God for us and who gives us freedom based on our relationship with him. In this process, Barth pays attention to how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit encounter the human life as one God, engaging in the shared and indivisible mission of recreating, redeeming, and transforming humanity in history. It is thus necessary to note that our investigation into how Barth's view Trinitarian model shows relevance to the theological context of Chin Christianity today should hold that his way of explaining how the triune God relates to us or how God establishes freedom in us always reflects the mutuality and interrelatedness of the life and work of the triune God. The intention of applying Barth's Trinitarian theology in the Chin context is for helping evangelical and ecumenical Christians to remold their Trinitarian perspectives, which will enable them to discern that the triune God stands in solidarity with them and that their encounter with God at this point serves as a liberating experience for them to live freely for God and for others. Moving forward, we will first explore how evangelical and ecumenical elements exactly characterize Chin Christianity. We will then analyze how Barth's view reshapes the Chin Trinitarian misconceptions and come to argue that their interaction with Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom invites the Chin to improve their "pastoral" and "political" imaginations.

Evangelical Christianity

When the time of American Baptist missionaries came to an end in 1966, as described in chapter 3, it was local Chin pastors and ordinary Christians whose faith and commitment shaped the form of Chin Christianity in a new era. In general, the role of the church then was known as preaching the Gospel to new places, nurturing new Christian communities, establishing schools, and advancing social development in various ways. It was also the time when the Chin started to live through the curse of Burmese nationalism. Their experience of living under the dehumanizing military rule was marked with endless oppression, suffering, and hopelessness. It is relevant to speculate that their interaction with this difficult experience pushed the Chin people to look for a new theological or spiritual experience that would speak adequately to their struggles. Having found themselves in such a challenging situation, they were eager to hear the preaching of the Gospel, which focused on how the loving God turns to embrace suffering people being oppressed by unjust sociopolitical system. There might have been more views on what caused evangelicalism to flourish in Chin Christianity, which became fully apparent in the 1970s. But the underlying sociopolitical circumstance that dehumanized the Chin can be seen as a factor leading to the popular embracing of evangelical movement in Chin Christianity. In telling how the mid-and late twentieth century witnessed church growth in the larger part of the globe, Brian Stanley writes that evangelical Christianity particularly appealed to women and men who were economically poor, politically oppressed, and educationally disadvantaged people.¹ This assessment is no less true in the case of the emergence of Chin evangelical Christianity. In consoling the suffering Chin

¹ Brian Stanley, *The Global Diffusion of Evangelicalism: The Age of Billy Graham and John Stott* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 15.

oppressed by the military rule, the evangelical movement intended to build up the life of Christians based on a new engagement with the Bible, emphasizing the authorities of the Bible, salvation through faith alone and the second coming of Jesus Christ.² Meanwhile, the movement targeted the church members with the object of evangelization rather than preaching the Gospel to unreached places.³ Unfortunately enough, division within the church turned out to be an inevitable outcome, for many evangelicals appeared to accuse mainline church pastors of being unregenerate ones who could not preach effectively or powerfully to their peoples. The evangelical Christians openly lamented that mainline churches did not well preach the transformative message of the Gospel for their people.

It is thus necessary to describe in more detail how this evangelical thinking has shaped Chin Christianity in a constructive manner. As the evangelical preachers turned to engage the Bible as a way for reassuring the worried people who were met with crises in all aspects of life, they were able to produce spiritual renewal and transformation in their life based on the preaching of the Gospel, thereby helping them to rediscover the sovereignty of God, the love and grace of God, and the redemptive work of God in Jesus Christ. They were brought back into the awareness of the meanings of grace, justification, sanctification, glorification, and preservation.⁴ People became spiritually fed based on their encounter with the Bible-centered preaching of the evangelical movement.⁵ They became more spiritual, more prayerful, and are eager to hear the Word of God more,

² Zomi Theological College, *Chin Church History*, 244-45.

³ Simon Pau Khan En, *Nat Worship: A Paradigm for Doing Contextual Theology in Myanmar* (Yangon: Judson Research Center of MIT, 2011), 14.

⁴ Zomi Theological College, *Chin Church History*, 174.

⁵ Zomi Theological College, 175.

which leads to spiritual and moral renewal. Rekindling hope in the life of people devastated by the military regime, the evangelical movement was committed to shaping Christian life on the basis of the relationship with God. The emergence of evangelicalism, therefore, serves as a pivotal hallmark in the spiritual revivalism of the Chin, showing effectiveness in terms of comforting the suffering Chin. The influence of evangelicalism is on the rise among the Chin today. The role of preaching in Chin evangelical churches has been marked by its emphasis on the transforming power of the love of God.⁶

How does this evangelicalism see the sociopolitical issues, then? The typical impression identified in the belief and action of the Chin evangelicals is that, due to their preoccupation with the subject of the otherworldly things such as spiritual salvation and life after death, they refuse to deal with human reality such as social injustice, political oppression, and every human tragedy.⁷ Truthfully speaking, many evangelical Christians are prone to think that living as Christians in the world means pursuing one's spirituality within the liturgical context rather than bothering with the matter of how to live as active Christians for the betterment of the society. The concept of how Christian spirituality relates to the society is much less focused in the theological structure of Chin evangelicalism. Rather, the tendency to isolate from the society has been a growing phenomenon among evangelical churches, holding that God looks more into how

⁶ Looking at the doctrinal trend in Chin Christianity across the globe within the last 20 years, it is discernible that many mainline churches, which are Baptist, have shown positive engagement with the evangelical theology and its implication at an increasing level. Hakha Baptist Church is the largest church in Chin State, Myanmar. When it held crusade intended for young people in the church in September, 2019, HBC invited a well-known Chin evangelist to be the speaker of the entire event. Indiana Chin Baptist Church, located in Indianapolis, USA, and known as one of the largest Baptist churches among diaspora Chin people, invited a noted Chin evangelist and preacher to be the speaker of its revival program twice in 2022. The evangelical focus on spiritual revival, newness of life and transformation has been widely attended in the liturgies of many mainline Chin churches either in preaching, prayers, songs, or trainings.

⁷ Laisum, "Naming God in Burma Today," 5.

Christians turn to him in faith than how they would live their life as responsible Christians in their sociopolitical world. These evangelicals insist that they are not citizens of this world but of heaven.⁸ Such perception leads them to focus more on the time when they will meet God in heaven while setting themselves free from the thought of what God requires them to do in the present world. Indeed, this is a clear breakaway from the theology and practice of missionary Christianity committed to transforming human life in its totality.

It is necessary to disclose that this evangelical tendency to isolating from the sociopolitical world has been determined by its conception of the Trinity. How is the triune God portrayed in the Chin evangelical theology? Despite its ability to inspire the Chin with its enthusiastic preaching on the love, grace, and forgiveness of God, the Chin evangelical theology is considered as incapable of presenting the triune God in a way that embraces the whole dimension of the human life. This is the result of the unhealthy influence of the “*mi*”⁹ ideology widely dominating the Trinitarian perspectives of the Chin. It will be helpful to clarify how the misperception of the Trinity brings about

⁸ There are many revival songs emphasizing that Christians should be more concerned for their future salvation. One song, which I am familiar with, deals with the belief that “we are children of the King of heaven.” When they sing revival songs like this, the Chin tend to think that God saves them for their spiritual life and that the most important thing for them is to hold on to their faith in God, thereby failing to consider what they should do as Christians for the present world. The result is such that the separation between spirituality and Christian life runs in deep in the imaginations of many evangelical Christians.

⁹ “*Mi*” is a distinct word in Chin. As already explained in chapter 1, it is used for identifying a human person. When this term is used, it reminds us that that person has a distinct identity and personality by which his or her dignity as a human being is respected and acknowledged. For instance, when I say that I have my “*mi*” identity, I imply that I have a distinct individual identity, which is different from that of other human beings. As there are not better or appropriate terms than this, the Chin use this term “*mi*” in naming or identifying the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Although it helps us to understand the distinct nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, its extensive use appears to be problematic in that it forces us to view them as detached and separated divine persons whose life and act in history are more or less individualistic or disconnected. This is to say that the use of “*mi*” ideology in the Trinity causes us to separate one divine person from the others, thereby failing to see how they are indivisibly united to each other in their life and act in human life. Thus, we need to deal with the improper influence of this “*mi*” in our Trinitarian imagination for reclaiming the nature of the indivisible life and act of the triune God.

problem within the structure of the Chin evangelical theology. Being forced by the tendency to perceive the identity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit based on the “*mi*” ideology, the evangelical Christians come to conceive them as detached divine persons working in human history in an individualistic or independent way. In this way, their association with the “*mi*” ideology causes Christians to lose sight of the unity, mutuality, and harmony in the life and act of the triune God. The Father is here assumed as higher in rank, having the authority to send the Son to the world. He is viewed as the one waiting for being propitiated through the sacrificial death of the Son on the cross, whose blood is then construed as bringing about reconciliation between God and sinful humanity. The soteriological function of Jesus Christ, especially how his substitutionary death or his blood served as a sacrifice for humanity, is strongly emphasized.¹⁰

Accordingly, the Holy Spirit is considered as being given to those who believe and accept Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior. But the receiving of the Holy Spirit at this point is restricted to a few individual Christians. Instead of paying careful attention to how the Holy Spirit transforms, builds up, or nourishes the life of individual Christians, the evangelicals tend to describe the work of the Holy Spirit more as the ability to foretell the future, to speak in tongues, to be emotionally motivated to perform certain things, to convict the sins or imperfections of people and so on.¹¹ What is more, the evangelicals hold that the Father, the Son and the Spirit have different times in engaging humanity,

¹⁰ Ross, “Development of Local Theology of the Chin (Zomi) of the Assemblies of God (AG) in Myanmar,” 184.

¹¹ Many Chin theologians and pastors recognize that Pentecostalism is on the rise among the Chin and that the Pentecostal Christians have their own perception of the Holy Spirit. However, I do not intend to give a distinct room for the Pentecostal view of the Holy Spirit here. The reason is that I have seen many similarities between the Chin Evangelicals and Pentecostals regarding the understanding of the Holy Spirit. Though I am not saying that the two share the same view of the Holy Spirit, my commitment to describing the evangelical view of the Holy Spirit well represents that of the Pentecostal, if not fully.

meaning the Father reveals into history during the Old Testament time, the Son during the New Testament period, and the Holy Spirit after the New Testament era. In this way, the sense of unity among the three divine persons with regard to how they are involved in human life comes to be much neglected. Instead of emphasizing unity, harmony and consistency in the life and act of the triune God, the Chin evangelicals interpret the role of the Holy Spirit as if it totally replaced the Father and the Son. Some evangelicals love to describe themselves as the only Christians who receive the Holy Spirit, thereby rating others as not receiving the Spirit or being unspiritual. Repeatedly speaking, they give less emphasis on how the Holy Spirit transforms the ethical life of humanity, prioritizing how the Spirit gives visions, the ability to speak in tongues or healing power. Their act of emphasizing the Holy Spirit at the expense of paying less attention to how the Spirit bears witness to the Father and the Son reveals that the Chin evangelicals have failed to see how the three divine persons engage humanity on the basis of their undivided unity.¹²

When it fails to grasp how the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit embrace humanity as one God and in unity for recreating and redeeming it in its existential world, the evangelical theology appears to be less concerned for how redeemed Christians, who acquire freedom through the relationship with the triune God, may live into their freedom in the sociopolitical world. Rather, Christian freedom comes to be assumed as a license to resign from the responsibility for the sociopolitical world. This Trinitarian misconception needs to be solved by studying how Barth speaks of the being and act of the triune God.

¹² Interview with Ngun Kham, Indianapolis (September 6, 2023).

Ecumenical Christianity

It is equally important to look at how the ecumenical trend characterizes the theological landscape of Chin Christianity different from the evangelical approach. When it comes to the ecumenical thought, our mind is filled with the denominational picture of the Baptist church, which is the largest denomination in Chin Christianity. When the missionary period came to an end in 1966, as discussed in chapter 3, it was local Baptist pastors and Christians who followed the footsteps of outgoing missionaries by way of choosing to be actively engaged in the social development of the Chin while pursuing the ministry of evangelism among the unreached peoples and leading the growing Christian communities in the form of theological leadership and spiritual formation. Their commitment to the implication of the social gospel was inspired not only by their respect for missionaries' example but also prompted by their interaction with the rule of military dictatorship, which knowingly ignored the social development of people. In analyzing how the missionary model initiated the ecumenical identity of Christianity in Myanmar, Pau Khan En argues that the missionaries preached the Gospel in a way that "embraced the desperate need of the people both spiritually and physically."¹³ Based on this conviction, many Baptist theologians and pastors teach their fellow Christians that being a Christian means being involved in the ministry of the social gospel, which speaks to the total dimension of the spiritual, physical, and social life of humanity. The effort of advancing the cultural, sociopolitical, and ecological issues becomes the essential part of the mission of many Baptist churches. Christian life is here defined as a life lived in the sociopolitical world. In envisioning the shape of Christian

¹³ Simon Pau Khan En, "The Ecumenical Perspective of Christianity: By the Churches in Myanmar," *RAYS MIT Journal of Theology* 10 (2009): 22.

theology in this light, Ling states that it should address practical issues like “economic poverty, religious freedom, gender, women and children, health, development and environment.”¹⁴ For Ling, theological education should aim “to set at liberty the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized, to heal the broken society, and to be in solidarity with the powerless and the poor in their struggles for justice, peace, and freedom.”¹⁵ He also remarks that Christians are called to be peacemakers, who must have the courage to actively seek peace and justice and to speak out against all forms of injustice, exploitation, and oppression.¹⁶ The understanding of the mission of the church among the Baptists is underlined by the vision for the unity of the churches, the unity of faith traditions (interfaith), the unity and renewal of humanity (holistic development) and the integrity of the whole creation (ecological salvation).¹⁷ The Gospel is thus seen as the transformative source for the total condition of human life. Spirituality is defined in this manner. Redefining spirituality in light of Christian involvement in the world, En states,

Spirituality is for life, for liberation, for struggle, for involvement in the realities of life, and to combat all dehumanized systems. It is not to call the Christians away from the order of this world but is a challenge to fight for justice in this world order. Spirituality . . . therefore, is not simply a personal piety, which is confined to one’s personal relationship with God, but it has a social dimension: what we do to others and for others, as the proxies of Christ. It is to get involved in social order and fight for the oppressed, the marginalized and the voiceless people, to bring them to authentic life.¹⁸

¹⁴ Samuel Ngun Ling, *Communicating Christ in Myanmar: Issues, Interactions and Perspectives* (Yangon: Published by Association of Theological Education in Myanmar, 2005), 128.

¹⁵ Ling, 129.

¹⁶ Samuel Ngun Ling, “Revisiting Baptist Ecclesiology in the Context of Myanmar,” 119.

¹⁷ Ling, 120-21.

¹⁸ En, *Nat Worship*, 304.

The struggle for freedom, liberty, and social justice has thus become a prominent feature of the ecumenical theology advocated for by Baptist theologians and pastors, calling for Christian participation in the struggle for freedom, democracy, and human rights. For Ling, “God challenges us to work for a society characterized by righteousness, justice, dignity and peace. We believers of Christ are commanded to care for the weak, the poor, the neglected, the widow, the orphans, the disadvantaged and all the helpless and hopeless in the society.”¹⁹ The theological themes characterizing ecumenical theology, thus, include holistic liberation, fullness of life, people’s struggle for justice and equality, women rights, peacemaking, economic rights, poverty alleviation, and social development. The ecumenical contribution to Chin Christianity is remarkable and essential in that it urges the Chin to live as responsible Christians for the society.

While ecumenical theologians and pastors are acknowledged for their role in envisioning Christian spirituality and the church’s mission in the broader context of the sociopolitical world, their overall approach is but still seen as less effective in inspiring spiritual renewal in Christian life. While recognizing their unswerving theological determination and faithful commitment to advancing the implication of the social gospel at all costs, it is discernible that their absolute preoccupation with sociopolitical issues leads them into the path that tends to pay less attention to the consideration of how to recreate or nurture the spiritual life of people through the Word of God, who have been struggling under harsh military rule. As they fail to pay careful attention to the matter of caring for the spiritual wholeness of ordinary Christians, the ecumenical leaders are seen as less thoughtful of how one is transformed by the relationship with the triune God. The

¹⁹ Samuel Ngun Ling, *Theological Themes for Our Times: Reflections on Selected Themes of the Myanmar Institute of Theology* (Yangon: Judson Research Center at MIT, 2007), 97.

weakness of the ecumenical theology is thus non-negligible, because it appears to be less capable of bringing Christians to the transformative knowledge of the triune God.²⁰

Our interaction with the inadequacy of the ecumenical approach at this point requires us to observe how the Trinity has been perceived in the theological landscape of Chin ecumenical Christianity. As they give more emphasis on how Christians should live their life in the world as the children of God or what they should do for the society, they fail to pay sufficient attention to how the triune God encounters humanity, stands in solidarity with it, and transforms it by bringing it into relationship with him. When it comes to the Old Testament, many ecumenical theologians and pastors are more interested in highlighting how the prophets speak of God in the act of urging people to struggle for social justice, righteousness, morality, and faithfulness, thereby paying less attention to how God turns to humans within the context of the spiritual sphere. In general, God is seen as the God who requires humans to fight against social injustices and to uphold righteousness and purity in their individual and societal life. In the case of the New Testament, they more emphasize how Jesus Christ brings salvation for the world in a holistic way as well as how his moral teaching lays out the paradigm of Christian responsibility for the sociopolitical world. The life of Jesus Christ is here seen as modeling the example of the struggle for social justice and human liberation. Although it does not totally neglect the Holy Spirit, the ecumenical thinking tends to define the Holy Spirit more as the source of intellectual and morality,²¹ thereby being less clear about

²⁰ Interview with Ngun Kham, Indianapolis (September 6, 2023).

²¹ It is visible that the talk of the Holy Spirit is less frequent in the ecumenical churches compared to the evangelical churches. It is also right to claim that their emphasis on the intellectual aspect of Christianity causes many ecumenical theologians and pastors to define and interpret the work of the Holy Spirit in terms of rational and moral functions, thereby paying less attention to how the Holy Spirit as God gives freedom to humans and produces transformative impact in the human life in a mysterious way.

how the Spirit engages the whole Christian life in unity with the Father and the Son or how the Father, the Son, and the Spirit encounter humanity in history as one God. Despite proving effectiveness in telling how the Chin should live actively in the sociopolitical world, this ecumenical approach is rated as inadequate, for it fails to underscore how our faith in the triune God brings about spiritual renewal and vitality in our Christian life.

While recognizing how both evangelical and ecumenical trends have shaped the structure of Chin Christianity in their respective ways, we realize that their weaknesses at this point has been marked by their inability to interpret the Trinity in a way that keeps the unity and mutuality of the triune God in his interaction with humanity. Such a divided view of the triune God comes to suggest that God is either only interested in the spiritual salvation of human beings or their ethnical righteousness. Their misunderstandings of the Trinity at this point tempts the Chin evangelicals to prioritize spiritual salvation at the expense of cutting off themselves from Christian responsibility for the world while persuading ecumenical Christians to emphasize the matter of Christian moral responsibility for the world at the expense of neglecting spiritual renewal based on the transformative encounter with the triune God. It is right to contend that both are in need of reshaping their gross misconceptions of the Trinity, which will be done in dialogue with Barth's view. In what follows, we will study how Barth offers a Trinitarian theology of freedom for Chin Christianity, which will appeal both evangelical and ecumenical Christians to reimagine the Trinity in a way that helps them to see that, when the triune God stands in solidarity with them, he shapes them to live positively for the society.

Reshaping with Barth's Model

As we turn to read Barth's Trinitarian theology in light of how it intersects the Trinitarian theology of Chin Christianity in its evangelical and ecumenical landscape, we will observe how Barth's Trinitarian view helps us to deal with the improper influence of the "*mi*" ideology, which tempts the Chin to disregard the unity and mutuality of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the course of the economic Trinity. This Trinitarian misconception turns out to be problematic in that it prevents the Chin from grasping the Trinity as a liberating and transformative act of God in their Christian life. In what follows, we will look at how Barth gives us a new understanding that pays attention to how the triune God encounters humanity in a mutual and interrelated manner.

His way of presenting the Trinity deals with how God comes to be known as the triune God who reveals into and engages human history as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In his attempt of revitalizing the Trinity, Barth argues how the triune God turns to and stands in solidarity with humanity in freedom. The triune God exercises his freedom and Lordship in turning toward humanity.²² When he speaks of how God uses his freedom and lordship as a self-revealing God in history, Barth never attributes those properties exclusively to one single person of the Trinity. Rather, he holds that freedom, lordship, and Godhead equally belong to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In holding the idea of divine unity, Barth avoids the word "persons" in his Trinitarian view. He is critical of the term "person," based on the concern that it can lead to the idea of "absolute personality" or "three personalities in God" in which the Father, the Son, and

²² CD I/1-8, 307n67.

the Holy Spirit might be seen as autonomous divine beings.”²³ In this way, he stresses that the three divine persons are not three parts of God operating alongside one another in three different functions.²⁴ Clearly, Barth helps us to grasp the distinct and inseparable unity in the life and act of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as unfolded in history.

It is appropriate to say that their interaction with Barth’s view can help the Chin to step away from overemphasizing the “*mi*” ideology, which usually pushes them to lose sight of the distinctive unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the encounter with humanity. Being preoccupied with the picture of the detached “*mi*” ideology, the Chin Christians are prone to interpret the identity and role of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in a disconnected way. When this happens, the “*mi*” identity of the Father appears to be viewed as separated from that of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Here, the “*mi*” identity of the Holy Spirit comes to be interpreted independently from that of the Father and the Son. Trinitarian persons are then individualized, thereby being reduced to the stage where the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are differentiated on the basis of their functional appearance in history. As already said, Barth is basically concerned that the term “person” might imply the idea of three centers of consciousness, something that would undermine the unity of God.²⁵ Having said that, the danger of personalizing or individualizing the “*mi*” identity of each Trinitarian person is well epitomized in Barth’s Trinitarian view. In all these, Barth focuses on the single subjectivity of God, thereby naming the Father the Revealer, the Son the Revelation, and the Spirit the Revealed-ness

²³ CD I/1-9, 358n71.

²⁴ CD I/1-10, 394n75.

²⁵ Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervon, 2006), 281n74.

without confusing or separating one from other divine persons.²⁶ In preventing the “*mi*” identity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit from being depicted in a detached individualistic way, Barth describes their respective roles as the manifestation of the one and shared mission of the one eternal God, thereby conveying the idea of how the triune God finds home with humanity as well as how the triune God gives freedom to humanity on the basis of unity, mutuality, and interrelatedness. For Barth, “All three persons are involved in each of God’s external works, because God Himself is totally present in all His eternal works The external works of the Trinity are indivisible.”²⁷ Such view of the Trinity should be used as a corrective tool for dealing with the Chin Trinitarian perceptions filled with divergent interpretations on the nature of the triune God driven by a distorted “*mi*” ideology. The fact of how Barth’s view shapes the Chin concept is better realized when analyzing the identity and role of three divine persons at a closer step.

It is correct to say that the Trinitarian perspective of the Chin has the tendency to portraying the “*mi*” identity of God the Father in a dominative way. Although it does not entirely neglect the loving nature of the Father, the Chin perception of the Trinity is prone to define the Father as being authoritative over the Son and the Holy Spirit—having the sole authority for controlling the whole drama of divine encounter with humanity in appointing the Son and the Holy Spirit in their respective places. As already said, the dominative figure of God the Father is particularly evidenced in the Chin evangelical theology. No doubt, the failure to liberate God the Father from a dominative imagination

²⁶ *CD* I/1-9, 363n82.

²⁷ George Hunsinger, “Karl Barth’s Doctrine of the Trinity, and Some Protestant Doctrines after Barth,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, edited by Gilles Emery, O.P. and Matthew Levering (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 302n87.

creates problem in our attempt for knowing how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit works in unity for redeeming and transforming humanity. For solving this case, we will try to discern how Barth speaks of the Father in relation to the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The figure of God the Father is given a definite place in the sphere of the Chin Trinitarian concept. Nevertheless, the image of the identity of God the Father turns out to be problematic, when it comes to be associated with the image of a dominating self, who lords over the Son and controls the Spirit. It is not irrelevant to express that the Chin concept of “father” has played an influential role in this regard. Known as patriarchal in nature, the family life of the Chin has been shaped by the figure of a father. The role of the father is seen as the highest authority in the life of a family. The father is thought of as being authoritative over his wife and children, who are then supposed to obey his words and live under his leadership. As such, the situation of the whole family life is dominated by the “*mi*” authoritative image of the father. This mentality comes as an influential factor in leading the Chin to hold that God the Father has the authority over the Son and the Holy Spirit in the Trinitarian life and act. Accordingly, they tend to describe the “*mi*” identity of God the Father as more essential than that of the Son and the Spirit. Such a dominating view of God the Father needs to be solved by looking at Barth’s concept of God the Father. When he speaks of the nature of God the Father as the eternal reality of God, Barth hints that we should not view God the Father as being ontologically antecedent or prior in terms of divine essence. In his view, the Father becomes Father not because his divinity is higher than that of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Rather, as he argues, “God is Father by virtue of his eternal relation to the Son.”²⁸ In

²⁸ Hunsinger, “Karl Barth’s Doctrine of the Trinity,” 304n93.

clarifying that the logical priority of God the Father does not imply superiority in terms of divine essence or ontology as if he was to exercise control over the Son and the Spirit, Barth states that the Son and the Spirit are of one essence with the Father, further claiming that “in this unity of the divine essence the Son is from the Father and the Spirit is from the Father and the Son, while the Father is from Himself alone.”²⁹ Barth’s emphasis on the concept of divine unity should, therefore, be seen as a theological impetus for the Chin to reimagine the image of God the Father, moving from portraying the Father as dominating or exercising power over the Son and the Holy Spirit. Barth clarifies that “we cannot call God the Father apart from the Son and the Spirit, nor can we call the Son Savior or the Spirit Comforter without also having the Father in view in both cases.”³⁰ Emphasizing their inseparable unity and mutuality in the course of a transformative divine encounter with humanity, Barth holds that the Father is integrally involved in the life of the Son in whom we come to know and acquire our salvation, and in the work of the Holy Spirit who has been at work in us as the divine Comforter.

In this light, the “*mi*” identity of God the Father comes to us as a loving, gracious, and transforming divine encounter from above. The dominative figure of the “*mi*” identity of God the Father lording over the Son is effectively replaced with a gracious and liberating “*mi*,” by which God the Father is seen as being in and with the Son as the loving Father. He is God for us whom we have known in the life of Jesus Christ. Such a transformative view of God the Father brings about a new atmosphere of love, unity, and mutuality, which needs to take place within the Chin Trinitarian understanding. The

²⁹ CD I/1-10, 393n95.

³⁰ CD I/1-10, 395n99.

image and identity of God the Father can be assumed as nothing other than the source of a transforming divine encounter for humanity. Therefore, a new Trinitarian imagination construing the Father as a loving, gracious, and free God who encounters us in the Son and who gives us freedom through the Spirit is to emerge from the act of interpreting the “*mi*” identity of the Father as being loving, gracious, and liberating for us. He is the loving Father who turns to us in the Son through the Holy Spirit. God the Father is a gracious and free God who turns to us in the Son and through the Holy Spirit.

As already indicated, the evangelical trend in Chin Christianity emphasizes how the death of Jesus Christ on the cross paves the way for achieving the spiritual salvation of humanity while the ecumenical approach emphasizes his ethical teaching. There is a clear theological line of divergence between evangelical and ecumenical Christians over the person and work of Jesus Christ. The evangelicals tend to view the “*mi*” identity of the Son in light of the exclusive concept of spiritual salvation. Instead of paying attention to how the “*mi*” identity of Jesus Christ is connected to that of God the Father, they hold that he is the realization of God’s contingent salvation plan for humanity that falls to the bondage of sin, and needs divine redemptive intervention for liberation from the grip of sin. Here, the “*mi*” identity of God the Son is more or less perceived as being subordinate to that of God the Father. Thus, the portrayal of the “*mi*” identity of the Son in Chin evangelical view neglects the theological nature of his connection with the Father and the Holy Spirit, disregarding how the Son reveals the Father or how he is revealed through the subjective work of the Spirit. Now, we will observe how Barth’s portrayal of the Son intersects the Chin perspective of the “*mi*” identity of the second person of the Trinity.

Barth interprets the life and act of Jesus Christ as the full revelation of the triune

God actualizing God's encounter with humanity. The "*mi*" identity of the Son as known in Barth's view testifies how the eternal God takes up humanity in its existential context. In and through Jesus Christ, Barth says, the triune God "turns to us, speaks with us, and wills to be heard by us and awakens our response."³¹ Depicting the life of the Son as the self-revelation of the eternal God, he argues, "God the Son embraces us as His creatures, seeks us and converses with us He deals us with as the Creator, but as a person with persons, not as a power with things."³² The eternal God encounters and meets us in our world by choosing to become God for us in the Son. The togetherness of God and humanity is fully visible in the life and act of the Son. The triune God exercises his freedom to be with us in the Son who reveals the Father to us, reconciles us to him, and brings us into fellowship with him. This Trinitarian understanding helps us to see how the triune God identifies us in our existential world where we are set to face rejection.

Jesus is the man-encountering God and the God-encountering man.³³ Assuming the form of humanity in Jesus Christ, Barth says, God "wants his freedom actually not to be without man but *with* him and in the same freedom not against him but *for* him He determines to love him, to be his God, his Lord, his compassionate Preserver and Saviour to eternal life, and to desire his praise and service."³⁴ In Jesus Christ, God exercises his sovereign freedom for giving himself to and sharing his love with humanity.³⁵ Freedom in God is a freedom to love, by which "God sacrifices his divinity to effect solidarity with

³¹ CD I/1-11, 407n103.

³² CD I/1-11, 413n104.

³³ Barth, *The humanity of God*, 55.

³⁴ Barth, 50-51.

³⁵ CD II/1-33, 175n123.

humanity.”³⁶ For Barth, “God’s freedom is essentially not freedom *from*, but freedom *to* and *for*.”³⁷ In explaining how the triune God exercises his freedom for electing humanity in Jesus Christ, Barth implies that this God embraces humanity in its totality, meaning there is no such thing as God is only interested in the spiritual dimension of the human life or God only cares for the moral dimension of humanity. The triune God as known in Jesus Christ turns to humanity for saving, liberating, and transforming it in its spiritual, moral, and social life. In Jesus Christ, the triune God embraces suffering and humiliation for the sake of humanity dehumanized in its existential world. The way that the Son of God chooses is one that leads “into the far country, i.e., into the lowliness of creaturely being, of being as man, into unity and solidarity with sinful and therefore perishing humanity”³⁸ The Son of God draws near to us and becomes one of us by undergoing the life of humiliation. This concrete divine drama teaches us how the triune God graciously allows humanity to take part in the inner life of his Godhead.³⁹ This way of perceiving the life of Jesus Christ helps the Chin to see how the triune God, in freedom, chooses to stand in solidarity with them, as they struggle in their sociopolitical world.

Barth’s perspective of the Son is remarkable for both evangelical and ecumenical Christians, for he depicts Jesus Christ as the God who, in freedom, chooses humility for the sake of human liberation and transformation. The triune God identifies and takes up humanity in the Son without restricting his salvific role to the exclusive spiritual realm.

³⁶ Nixon de Vera, *The Suffering of God in the Eternal Decree: A Critical Study of Karl Barth on Election* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2020), 93n125.

³⁷ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), 72n126.

³⁸ CD IV/3-69, 211n138.

³⁹ CD IV/3-69, 215n139.

Our engagement with Barth's view of the Son reminds us that the triune God turns to the suffering Chin while they are abandoned and dehumanized in their sociopolitical world. It is the loving God who turns to the Chin and elects them in Jesus Christ while they are rejected in their sociopolitical world. God exercises his freedom for humanizing the Chin while they are indiscriminately dehumanized by the unjust Burmese nationalist politics. Therefore, the sense of Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom reminds us that the triune God exercises his sovereign freedom to elect us in Jesus in whom we are brought into the life of the triune God who enables us to live as liberated Christians in our world. Now we will see how Barth helps the Chin to have a more complete view of the Holy Spirit.

The misperception of the Holy Spirit in Chin Christianity is underlined by the tendency to separate the person and work of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son, which leads to depicting the Holy Spirit as a mere divine gift given to a few individual Christians in a mysterious way, and confusing it with the mere function of intellectualism or restricting it to the exclusive source of morality. There is no clear emphasis on how the Holy Spirit interacts with us as God and how he is at work in us. That being said, the role of the Holy Spirit has been much neglected, and thus, considered as less important in the overall theological landscape of Chin Christianity. In what follows, we will explore how Barth comes to offer a more complete view of the Holy Spirit to the Chin Christians.

In defending the distinct "*mi*" identity of the Holy Spirit, Barth claims that "The Holy Spirit is no less and no other than God Himself, distinct from Him whom Jesus calls His Father, distinct from Jesus Christ Himself, yet not less than the Father, and no less than Jesus, God Himself, altogether."⁴⁰ Known as the equal bearer of the Lordship of

⁴⁰ CD I/1-12, 459n147.

God together with the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit in Barth's view is "The one sovereign divine Subject, the Subject who is not placed under the control or inspection of any other, who derives His being and existence from Himself."⁴¹ Analyzing Barth's view of the subjective role of the Holy Spirit, Thompson says, "The Spirit is God in us opening up our lives to know his Word in Jesus Christ and bringing us that effectively to us. The Spirit is both the subjective reality and agent of divine revelation."⁴² In clarifying how the Holy Spirit works in inseparable unity with the Son, Thompson continues to argue, "The objective meaning of the death of Christ for our sins and justification becomes ours through the work of the Holy Spirit."⁴³ The Holy Spirit is thus seen as integrally involved in the work of Jesus Christ. That is to say that the Holy Spirit never works independently from the Son. The Holy Spirit always works in connection with the Father and the Son. For Barth, "The Holy Spirit certainly comes to us, not by an independent road which bypasses the Word and its testimonies, but by the Word and its testimonies."⁴⁴ In this regard, the Spirit plays an indispensable divine role in bringing Christians to the true understanding of the work of Jesus Christ while transforming and bringing them into relationship with the triune God. All that the Spirit does in actualizing the subjective revelation of God is to re-present the objective revelation of God known in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit directs the hearts of human beings to the revelation of God.

The Holy Spirit, Barth says, "draws and takes us right into the reality of

⁴¹ *CD* I/1-12, 469n150.

⁴² John Thompson, *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1991), 25n156.

⁴³ Thompson, 78.

⁴⁴ *CD* I/2-16, 236n157.

revelation by doing what we cannot do, by opening our eyes and ears and hearts, He does not tell us anything except that we are in Christ by Christ.”⁴⁵ The Holy Spirit has been at work in us, re-presenting the Son to us, liberating us, and helping us to grow in our faith in God. He gives us the freedom to become the children of God so that we may be able to love and praise him in his revelation.⁴⁶ We are able to know and accept God’s Word when the Holy Spirit makes us free inwardly to say “yes” to God’s Word. “Apart from the reality of the Holy Spirit we are not free for God.”⁴⁷ Our ability to know God as well as to acknowledge what God has done for us in Jesus Christ has been determined by the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit places God and humans together whereby the Spirit brings God to be discerned, heard, and known by humans. It is through the Holy Spirit that the real togetherness of God and human is a possibility.⁴⁸ The Holy Spirit enables us to begin our new life as God’s children, to live in relationship with God, to know God’s Word, and to apprehend God’s revelation.⁴⁹ A person is liberated from old sinful and depraved nature and is transformed into authentic, real communion with God when the Holy Spirit gives divinely freedom to him or her.⁵⁰ In revitalizing the love of God in us, the Holy Spirit transforms, liberates, and empowers us to love God and other people around us. When the Holy Spirit effects change in us by way of producing faith in

⁴⁵ CD I/2-16, 242n161.

⁴⁶ CD I/2-16, 203n162.

⁴⁷ CD I/2-16, 244n165.

⁴⁸ CD I/2-16, 246n170.

⁴⁹ CD I/2-16, 272n172.

⁵⁰ Peter S. Oh, *Karl Barth’s Trinitarian Theology: A Study in Karl Barth’s Analogical Use of The Trinitarian Relation* (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 131n177.

our heart, that faith impacts our whole activity, existence, inner and outward life as believers.⁵¹ The Holy Spirit is the one who moves humans to turn to God. In Romans 8:15-16, Paul states, “we are able to pray ‘Abba, Father’ out of the Holy Spirit.” We have the inner power to approach God when the Holy Spirit operates in our hearts. Also in 1 Corinthians 12:3, Paul says, “No one says Jesus is Lord except through the Holy Spirit.” We can respond to Christ in faith only through the operation of the Holy Spirit within us. Humans have faith in their lives, a faith by which they respond to Christ, when the Holy Spirit awakens, confronts, and illuminates their minds.⁵² As Barth claims, “the Holy Spirit is the power in which Jesus Christ makes human free and makes him or her genuinely free for his or her choice and for faith.”⁵³ Humans turn to Christ in faith when the Holy Spirit makes them free to do so. They are able to respond to Christ not just cognitively but attitudinally when they experience the awakening power of the Holy Spirit in their lives.⁵⁴ The Holy Spirit opens the eyes of their minds to see the love of the triune God. The Holy Spirit can, therefore, be said as the power at work in humans’ lives, making them see what they should see and do what they should be doing. Therefore, a sign of new birth emerges in a person’s life when he or she acknowledges and confesses Jesus Christ as Lord through the Holy Spirit.⁵⁵ A liberating view of the Trinity will be discerned when the Chin Christians pay attention to the subjective and empowering work

⁵¹ Karl Barth, *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life: The Theological Basis of Ethics*, translated by R. Birch Holyle (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 36n178.

⁵² CD IV/1-68, 748.

⁵³ CD IV/1-68, 748.

⁵⁴ CD IV/1-68, 753.

⁵⁵ CD IV/1-68, 753.

of the Holy Spirit, especially how the Spirit redeems, liberates, or transforms us as God.

Despite having his distinct “*mi*,” the identity and work of the Holy Spirit is never separated from that of the Father and the Son. The Holy Spirit is always involved in the Christian life, renewing and re-presenting the salvific work of Jesus Christ in us in a transformative way. Taking the subjective role in engaging our human life, the Holy Spirit brings us into a new relationship with the triune God whereby we come to acquire new freedom, which empowers us to live as effective persons in the world. When the Holy Spirit is at work in us, “The Christian is liberated from isolation to communion, from the unlimited possibility to the one necessity, from bondage before things to freedom for humanity, from indecision to action, from the dialectic of good and evil to that of forgiveness and gratitude, and—finally—from anxiety to prayer.”⁵⁶ In claiming the Holy Spirit as the source of the existence of Christianity in the world, Barth states, “The Spirit calls into being the existence of every single Christian as a believing, loving, hoping witness to the Word of God.”⁵⁷ The Spirit is the freedom of God by which God discloses himself to humans, makes them accessible to himself, and so to make them on their part free for him.⁵⁸ The Spirit sets us free and empowers us for the new life of friendship and service for others.⁵⁹ The freedom that we receive through the Holy Spirit is a kind of freedom that liberates us “from bondage to sinful ways of life in which we seek to be our own god and disregard the welfare of others. Christians are called to

⁵⁶ Paul Nimmo, “Barth on Vocation,” *The Willey Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, Vol.II, edited by George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 323.

⁵⁷ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, translated by Grover Foley (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963), 55.

⁵⁸ Barth, 53.

⁵⁹ Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 287.

freedom from bondage to ideologies of race, nation, domination, and wealth.”⁶⁰ This freedom “involves choosing fellow human beings *gladly* and consists in conforming to our human reality—the reality of our need to be in encounter with others.”⁶¹ This means that, when the Holy Spirit brings us to the deeper knowledge of God whereby we are given freedom and shaped anew for growing into a new relationship with the triune God, this encounter also enables us to live as productive and effective Christians in the world. As such, the prospect of the new Trinitarian theology of freedom is founded on this belief that the Holy Spirit gives us the freedom to become God’s children and to live for others.

The Chin evangelical and ecumenical Christians are required to reconsider their conventional views of the Holy Spirit in light of the implication of Barth’s concept. This attempt urges them to get rid of their narrow and exclusive perceptions of the Holy Spirit, which has the tendency either to mystify the role of the Holy Spirit or to domesticate it in the closed realm of human intellectualism and moralism. In giving us a comprehensive, effective, and constructive perception of the Holy Spirit, Barth’s concept reminds us that the Holy Spirit has been at work in our Christian life in a subjective way, redeeming and transforming us to be able to live as liberated children of God. The Holy Spirit gives us new freedom, which empowers us to live for others. For Malcolm, “The Spirit is God’s energizing power in our lives, continually working good out of whatever is happening to us or around us. Living out of the Spirit’s life, we find we become more expansive and more generous. We have greater sense of our worth and the worth of others. The Spirit

⁶⁰ Migliore, 288.

⁶¹ Daniel J. Price, *Karl Barth’s Anthropology in Light of Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 153.

opens us up to new possibilities, since for God all things are possible.”⁶² Going beyond their exclusive views of the Holy Spirit, the Chin evangelical and ecumenical Christians need to see how the Holy Spirit plays an integral role in our life, who renews the love of God in us, sustains us as we grow into relationship with God, and gives us freedom, which empowers and prepares us anew for living as responsible Christians in the society. The Holy Spirit is God who subjectively interacts with us as God, uniting us with God in a liberating way, and empowering us to live as liberated Christians in the world. The true implication of Barth’s Trinitarian theology of freedom comes to be discovered when it clarifies that the Holy Spirit enables us to exercise our freedom for the sake of others.

Thus far, we have explored how Barth’s Trinitarian theology appeals the Chin to reformulate their perception of the Trinity. The transformative nature of the Trinitarian theology for Chin Christianity is thus realized when the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are portrayed, defined, and presented in a way that respects their inseparable unity in the entire mission of divine encounter with humanity. Barth helps us to acquire a new Trinitarian perception when he demonstrates that, in freedom, the triune God encounters and turns to us in Jesus Christ in whom we come to see how we are elected and embraced into the life of the triune God, no matter what our existential circumstance. We come to realize God’s full solidarity with us in our existential world when he turns to us in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit has been work in us, who draws us to the relationship with the triune God, who gives us the gift of freedom and enlivens it in us, which enables us to live as transformed Christians in the real world. In all these, we have seen the clear picture of the distinctive unity and relation among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, who

⁶² Lois Malcolm, *Holy Spirit: Creative Power in Our Lives* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2009), 61.

engage in the same divine mission of redeeming and transforming humanity. In helping us to move step beyond the tendency to extol Christian spirituality in isolation from the contextual realities, Barth reminds us that the transformative role of Christianity for its sociopolitical environment is basically conditioned by its encounter with a liberating and transformative view of the Trinity. There are, at least, two critical implications for Chin Christianity, which we can draw from Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom. His emphasis on the triune God's solidarity with humanity in the Son can be considered as a "pastoral" significance, which will be instrumental in dealing with the Chin being oppressed, exploited, and dehumanized in their world. Meanwhile, his emphasis on how the triune God exercises his freedom to become God for us as well as how the triune God gives freedom to humanity to live for others can be seen as a helpful base for envisioning Christian participation in the "political" sphere of the public world.

Pastoral Implications

Barth offers a powerful imagination with regard to pastoral concern when he argues that the triune God determines himself to be in solidarity with humanity. His treatment of God's identification with humanity well affirms that the triune God truly cares for the condition of humanity. It is Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger who comes to interpret Barth's Trinitarian theology as a helpful ground for envisioning an effective practical hermeneutics. Echoing Barth's concept of self-humiliation of the triune God for the sake of humanity, Hunsinger notes, "Although Lord, God becomes servant. Although eternal, God becomes subject to human flesh and, therefore, to human time and suffering. In Jesus Christ God humbles himself and becomes human, taking on our sin and suffering

on our behalf and for our sakes.”⁶³ The eternal God humbles himself to assume the life of suffering and humiliation for the sake of our liberation. The triune God chooses to be together with us. Barth thus effectively envisions the nature of the triune God in a pastoral way, when he features the concrete view of God’s identification with humanity in history. In a sermon he delivered to prisoners in Basel on December 23, 1956, he said,

He who loves us infinitely more than we love ourselves saw the misery in which we engulf ourselves by thinking we know how to love and understand ourselves. He saw the hardships, the atrocities, the injustice and the disorder, he saw our false securities and our breakdowns. He could not stand it any more. He could not bear any longer being God on high without being God on earth, our helper, saviour and redeemer. And he not only wanted action, but he *took* it! He has called us, the unworthy, he has led us to his house and opened the door for us, he even gave us our own key, he has invited us to his table and given us of his bread and of his wine. He has acted like a true Father for us. He has given us a home with himself where we may live and work, and even play and rejoice as his children—a home from which we shall not be driven out. We shall never more be strangers, orphans, refugees. This is what he has done.⁶⁴

In arguing how Barth’s thought offers a pastoral implication, Andrew Root also says, “The dialectical shape of Barth’s theology is his concrete way of helping his people encounter the real presence of the God of Israel who is acting in and for the world.”⁶⁵ Indeed, Barth’s Trinitarian theology of freedom helps us to envision the presence of the triune God anew, as we come to reimagine the nature of the triune God in response to the realities of the sociopolitical context of the Chin today. Needless to say, their painful experience of living under oppressive military rule causes the Chin to suffer so much so that they appear to be totally desperate and hopeless about the betterment of their present

⁶³ Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling: A New Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 124.

⁶⁴ Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 70-71.

⁶⁵ Andrew Root, *Churches and the Crisis of Decline: A Hopeful, Practical Ecclesiology for a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 270.

life. Given the hard situation they have gone through for so long, the dehumanized Chin need to be assured that the triune God encounters them and stands in solidarity with them in their sociopolitical struggle. In clarifying how the free God embraces humanity in history, as already highlighted, Barth vividly demonstrates that God's unconditional Yes is graciously pronounced to humankind.⁶⁶ Therefore, Barth's presentation on God's transformative encounter with humanity serves as a constructive pastoral imagination for approaching the Chin struggling in their challenging and difficult circumstances, where they endlessly embrace denials, oppressions, and distortions of their dignity. Clearly, the marginalized Chin will acquire a transformative view of the triune God, who relates to and stands solidarity with them in their suffering, when the Chin theologians and pastors engage Barth's perspective in their pastoral approach—theologically and pragmatically.

Such approach helps us to experience God the Father as the God who is not remote from us, but who gets himself near to us for sharing our human realities. It also reminds us of how the triune God elects us in Jesus Christ to live in relationship with him and how we come to be transformed by the redemptive power of the Holy Spirit. This Trinitarian imagination provides us with the view of how we obtain our salvation in Christ and how we are reshaped by the Spirit to live as redeemed Christians in the world. The picture of how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit engage the worried life of Christian needs to be more reflected in our pastoral engagement with the suffering Chin. Indeed, the oppressed Chin need to be convinced of how they are embraced in Jesus Christ and how they are given inner freedom through the Holy Spirit, which would potentially direct and shape the entire course of their challenging life. As a gift given to us, this freedom

⁶⁶ Christiane Tietz, "On Reading Karl Barth in the USA: Laudation Given at the Conferment of the Karl Barth Prize 2010," *Theology Today* 69, no. 2 (2012): 137.

“awakens the receiver to true selfhood and new life.”⁶⁷ Our practical interaction with the dehumanized Chin should aim at helping them to rediscover their dignity, selfhood, and value based on their encounter with the triune God, who concretely embraces, restores, and reaffirms us in our world. Experiencing God’s presence and involvement in their life will inspire us to live as hopeful and resilient Christians in our sociopolitical world.

The triune implication of Barth’s Trinitarian theology of freedom for us is that our preaching should focus on bringing people to a deeper awareness of the Word of God, reminding them of the love of God, and strengthening their faith and hope. In doing so, the foundation on which we base our theological principle is nothing other than the conviction that the triune God embraces us while we feel rejected and abandoned. The evangelical Christians are invited to pay attention to how the eternal God determines himself to turn to and embrace humanity in its totality. Indeed, the triune God cares for the total dimension of human life. As such, their interaction with Barth’s view at this point requires them to move beyond their exclusive position on Christian salvation. The new insight that they have received from Barth’s concept pushes them to reconsider how their preaching might better deal with the total dimension of the life of the suffering Chin. Their pastoral interaction with their fellow Christians should more reflect the view that the triune God is the God who chooses humiliation and suffering for the sake of our liberation and redemption. His transformative encounter with us in our suffering reaffirms and restores our dignity. In humanizing us in our awful and hopeless situation, the triune God stands in solidarity with us, and empowers us to live as hopeful Christians in the world. Meanwhile, Barth’s model urges the ecumenical theologians and pastors to

⁶⁷ Gorringer, *Karl Barth against Hegemony*, 279.

rethink the effectiveness of their conventional theology, particularly in the area of their pastoral approach to the situation of the suffering Chin Christians. Needless to say, their exclusive tendency to interpret spirituality with the sole purpose of advancing Christian involvement in the sociopolitical world more or less persuades them to pay less attention to the matter of preaching the Gospel in a way that would better inspire the spiritual growth of the ordinary Christians. Truthfully speaking, their exclusive attempt for requiring their fellow Christians to be involved in sociopolitical matters at the cost of paying less attention to how the triune God transforms humanity usually leaves the latter with the inability to imagine who the triune God is or how he is at work in their daily life. That being said, Barth calls for ecumenical theologians and pastors to fully concentrate on how their preaching in the liturgical setting might better help their fellow people to be conscious of God's solidarity with them in their hopeless and desperate situation. The prospect of reshaping the spiritual and emotional life of the dehumanized Chin by preaching the transformative act of the triune God should, therefore, be more emphasized in the theological imagination and enterprise of the ecumenical theologians and pastors.

Both the evangelical and ecumenical trends need to reshape the form of their pastoral engagement with the ordinary Chin in conversation with the implications of Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom. The significance of Barth's perspective for the Chin context today is that it offers to present the triune God, who actualizes his solidarity with us, when our sociopolitical existence is basically characterized with the cursing faces of rejection, oppression, and dehumanization. The transformative encounter with the triune God will be realized in the life of the oppressed Chin, when we reformulate our pastoral approaches to them in light of our conviction of how we are embraced by God.

Political Implications

Our study of Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom shows that, when they are brought to a new relationship with the triune God, Christians are given new freedom that is supposed to characterize how they would interact with their sociopolitical world. This Trinitarian concept is essential for reshaping the evangelical and ecumenical trends in Chin Christianity, which have divergent views on how Christians should view or respond to the sociopolitical issues. The Chin evangelical Christians, as already mentioned, are generally known as being silent over the political matters. Perceiving political issues as having less to do with their Christian faith and life, many Christians keep silent when social injustices come to be widely prevalent in their surrounding. In their belief, as already highlighted, Christians are saved for their spiritual life, which should be lived in relationship with God. They are not but too enthusiastic, when it comes to the thought of how they as redeemed Christians would relate to the society. Their tendency to isolate from the society becomes even more evident as they, Mang argues, "overemphasize the eschatological future after this present life on earth to the point where they flee from the secular affairs of this mundane world, which results in the church being disengaged from the political affairs of the country as a public moral voice."⁶⁸ Another reason largely preventing the Chin from thinking of what they should do for the society is the idea of separation between church and state, which explains that the church should not meddle in the political affairs of the state, but should be neutral in public issues without taking social engagement in the political issues affecting the entire country.⁶⁹ Ignoring the

⁶⁸ Pum Za Mang, "Ethnic Persecution and Public Vocation of the Church in Burma" (PhD Dissertation, Luther Seminary, 2017), 18.

⁶⁹ Mang, 19.

thought of the political theology and role of the church, many Christians tend to privatize their Christian faith and maintain the passive position in relation to the sociopolitical issues. For dealing with the Chin Christian tendency to interpret spirituality in isolation from the sociopolitical world, we will look at how Barth structures the political role of Christianity on the basis of this view that Christians are given freedom to live for God and others. It is also discernible that Barth exemplifies what it means to live in the society as engaged Christian while presenting himself as a practitioner of evangelical theology.

When he joined the Social Democratic Party in January 1915, preceded by the view that he needs to have a firmer political position for siding with the working people in his congregation, Barth claimed, “I did not permit myself to float in the clouds above the current evil world any longer, for right now it must be shown that faith in what is greatest does not exclude but rather includes work and suffering in the imperfect.”⁷⁰ Here, his faith in God draws him to stand in solidarity with the people struggling in their economic life. As a pastor, he was concerned not only for the spiritual dimension of his people, but also for their sociopolitical life. In doing so, he spoke against capitalism, which, in his view, remained as an exploitative economic principle for the people. In renouncing the function of the capitalist system, he advocated the principle of socialism for his pariah community. Barth’s example well reminds us that, as theologians and pastors, we should be equally passionate for taking side with our people in their sociopolitical world and should care for what we can do for their spiritual, social, and economic wellbeing. As Tietz asserts it, “Christianity for Barth was no longer a matter

⁷⁰ Frank Jehle, “Intellectual and Personal Biography I: The Young Barth (1886-1921),” translated by Paul T. Nimmo and Paul Dafydd Jones, *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, edited by Paul T. Nimmo and Paul Dafydd (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 24-25n36.

primarily of the inner life. Now it had to do with concrete external problems.”⁷¹ The pastor Barth thus cared for the external life of his people as much as he was concerned for the wellbeing of their inner spiritual life. His active engagement with the real context of his people implies that the expression of Christian faith should be visible in the real world. His idea of the political role of Christianity is more visible when looking at how he appealed Christians to confront issues of racism and authoritarianism in Germany.

His interaction with the sociopolitical climate in Germany was underlined by his criticisms of German evangelical theologians and ordinary Christians, who cooperated with the Nazi socialist regime without hesitance. Addressing to a large gathering of pastors on October 31, 1933, he stated, “What has happened to the concentration camps? What (was done) . . . to the Jews? Is the church not complicit, because it has remained silent? Whoever has to preach the Word of God must say to such events what the Word of God says.”⁷² At this point, Barth demonstrates that the church should speak against sociopolitical injustices, which dehumanize the life of the defenseless and the oppressed. This means that the church should not speak only about its own affairs.⁷³ Rather, the church should open doors for the oppressed and the marginalized, and should exist in solidarity with all the suffering people.⁷⁴ Throughout his career he boldly spoke for the

⁷¹ Christiane Tietz, *Karl Barth: A Life in Conflict* (Oxford: University Press, 2021), 63n44.

⁷² Eberhard Busch, “Intellectual and Personal Biography II: Barth in Germany (1921-1935),” *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, edited by Paul Dafydd Jones and Paul T. Nimmo (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 46n141.

⁷³ Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, translated by John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 261n149.

⁷⁴ Eberhard Busch, “Intellectual and Personal Biography II: Barth in Germany (1921-1935),” *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, edited by Paul Dafydd Jones and Paul T. Nimmo (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 48n150.

wellbeing, freedom, and liberation of afflicted humanity. He was restless in the church struggle for stopping dictatorship, for protecting humanity from harmful treatment, for liberating enslaving humanity, and for healing rivalry and disunity among Christians. His engagement with politics has been always underpinned by his passion for defending the prosperity of human life. As he was involved in ecumenical movement, Barth spoke for Christian unity and solidarity with the poor and the hungry.⁷⁵ He criticized the actions of ecumenical leaders and representatives, which did not support real relationship, equality, and acceptance of the poor and the hungry.⁷⁶ Arguing that the church must be concerned for and must stand in solidarity with the poor and the lowest in the society, Barth says, “The Church must stand for social justice in the political sphere.”⁷⁷ The core of his theological principle renounces the hegemonic tendencies and disempowering powers while seeing the work of humanization as characteristic of the kingdom of God.⁷⁸

The Chin ecumenical churches can be said as moving in line with Barth’s direction at some points, for they are found to be active in the cause of Christian participation in the sociopolitical issues. The political role of Christianity has been remarkably reflected in the belief and practices of many Baptist theologians and pastors. However, the significance of Barth’s view for us is that our positive interaction with the sociopolitical world stands as an expression of our relationship with the triune God. This is to say that Barth wants the Chin ecumenical Christians to discern that their engagement

⁷⁵ Boniface Willems, O.P., *Karl Barth: An Ecumenical Approach to His Theology*, Translated by Matthew J. Velzen (Glen Rock: The Paulist Press, 1965), 74n181.

⁷⁶ Willems, 76n182.

⁷⁷ Karl Barth, *Community, State and Church* (New York: Doubleday & Company, INC., 1960), 173.

⁷⁸ Rigby, “Karl Barth (1886-1968),” 350.

with the society is a reflection of the freedom they have received from God. The freedom that we have acquired from the triune God is one that inspires and motivates us to speak about issues disrupting the wellbeing of humanity. Barth says, “Freedom for which you would stand would be the freedom for—I like to say a single word—humanity Of that freedom to which the Son frees us, and which as his gift, is the one real human freedom.”⁷⁹ As bearer of God’s freedom, the Christians should be active in the struggle for the wellbeing and improvement of the life of other people. In using their freedom for confessing solidarity with suffering men and women, Christians should be in the fight for “relative improvements in their condition, for a greater measure of freedom, joy and peace”⁸⁰ The freedom which Christians receive from the triune God is what moves them to share the suffering of others and also to work for the improvement of their conditions and for their liberation. In his treatment of Barth’s position against hegemony, Gorringer writes, “Christians are summoned to revolt not against people, but for all humankind and therefore against the disorder which controls and poisons and disrupts all human relations and interconnections.”⁸¹ Christians are thus called to fight against any sociopolitical systems disrupting the wellbeing of the human life and to use their God-given freedom for the sake of the liberation of others. Ironically speaking, this freedom is not a freedom that tells us to separate ourselves from the responsibility for the good of others. Nor, is this a freedom that tempts us to gloss over our Christian privilege in isolation from our sociopolitical environment. This freedom empowers and inspires us to

⁷⁹ Barth, *How I Changed my Mind*, 79.

⁸⁰ William Werpehowski, “Barth and Public Life,” *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, edited by Paul T. Nimmo and Paul Dafydd (Oxford: University Press, 2019), 555.

⁸¹ Gorringer, *Karl Barth against Hegemony*, 265.

strive for the prosperity of public life, to see our fellow human beings as the object of the love of the triune God, and to be involved in helping them to achieve a better life.

This Trinitarian imagination calls for the Chin evangelicals to leave behind their isolationist position and to exercise their God-given freedom in engaging social injustice and political dysfunctions dehumanizing public life. Our interaction with Barth's life and thought teaches us that Christianity faith and spirituality should never be privatized, but should be manifested in the actual world, where we set to live into our freedom for the liberation and improvement of the life of the dehumanized and the poor. In pointing out Barth's critique that the privatization of faith opposes to Jesus' commission of his disciples into the public world, Moe claims, Barth "called Christians to witness to God's social justice and charity to the world."⁸² The view of Christian responsibility for the public arena is thus well affirmed in Barth's thought. A Chin theologian Stephen Hre Kio writes, "Christians need to participate in the political process of the country like anybody else. Christians should and must be involved in whatever happens here on earth; they are not angels walking here on earth, untouched by what happens on this earthly existence."⁸³ Leaving behind the disengaged mentality, the Chin Christians should be willing to use their God-given freedom for doing things essential for the good of other people. As already discussed, the structure of missionary Christianity has been well defined by its commitment to transforming human life in a holistic manner. The vision for achieving the wellbeing and prosperity of the human life in its totality has well characterized the shape of missionary Christianity. While focusing on the ministry of preaching the Gospel in a

⁸² Moe, "Reading Karl Barth in Myanmar," 428.

⁸³ Stephen Hre Kio, "The Role of Christians in Politics," *Hakha Golden Jubilee Magazine (1965-2015)*/2015, 275.

transformative way, it introduced new civilization that changes the life of the Chin in their social, cultural, and physical lives. Missionary Christianity is involved in the transformation and wellbeing of the spiritual, mental, and physical life of the Chin. The important theological and practical legacy we receive from this Christianity causes us to remember that, when we live our Christian faith in the liturgical setting, we should equally be concerned for advancing the practical ministry for the outside world. We should never divert our attention away from the thought of shaping the society with our Christian spirituality, which should always be undergirded by a true understanding of the Trinity. As we are reminded, the secret for us to live as positive and responsible Christians for the world has been basically conditioned by our relationship with the triune God. Truthfully, the transformative and liberating impact of Chin Christianity in its sociopolitical environment will be better realized when it acquires a new understanding of the Trinity, which comes reshape its entire theological and practical positions. Such Trinitarian insight assures us that the triune God is with us in our daily life and that the freedom that we receive from him empowers us to live as positive and engaged Christians for our sociopolitical world. This view asks the evangelicals to abandon their disengaged mentality and to use their freedom for the betterment of their sociopolitical world while reminding the ecumenical Christians that their interaction with the society is a reflection of how they live in relationship with the triune God who relates to them in their world.

Summary

In this chapter, we have argued that their interaction with Barth's Trinitarian theology requires the Chin to accept the inseparable connection between evangelical and ecumenical elements in their Christian life and practice. In this sense, the evangelicals are

called to realize that the spirituality they have acquired based on their faith in the triune God should be concretely visible in their active engagement with the sociopolitical world. Likewise, the ecumenical Christians are invited to discern that the task of building up the Christian spiritual life on the basis of the transforming encounter of the triune God should be emphasized in their preaching and pastoral ministry. In doing so, both evangelical and ecumenical groups in Chin Christianity need to reshape their misperceptions of the Trinity, which usually ignores the distinct nature of the indivisible unity in the life and act of the triune God. The liberating nature of the Trinity for the Chin will be achieved when the life and act of the triune God is interpreted and presented in its undivided form. Such theological attempt helps us to discern how the triune God turns to, embraces, and brings humanity into relationship with him. This Trinitarian view assures the Chin that the triune God uses his freedom to stand in solidarity with them when they are oppressed, exploited, dehumanized, and rejected in the course of their long sociopolitical experience. When God turns to humanity in freedom, he gives freedom to humanity as a gift, which restores the distorted dignity of the Chin and empowers them to live actively and positively in the society. Finally, the significance of Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom for the Chin lies in the fact that it effectively persuades both the evangelical and ecumenical churches to rethink and redesign their conventional pastoral and political approaches on the basis of their understanding of the transformative and liberating work of the triune God.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

In this research, I tried to argue that a liberating understanding of the Trinity is achieved in Chin Christianity when we look to Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom, reminding us that our perception of the Trinity assures us about God's solidarity with us in our struggle in life and that the freedom we receive from the triune God effectively prepares us to engage the sociopolitical world in a positive and responsible manner. The role of Chin Christianity in its sociopolitical context is imagined and based on this view.

First, I explored the sociopolitical history and experience of the Chin for recalling how the Chin have sacrificed, suffered, and struggled in their sociopolitical existence. The Chin had lived as independent people in their land until they fell under the rule of the British in 1890s. Their resistance against the British well spoke of their desire for freedom, selfhood, and the right to self-determination. The Chin joined the Burmese and other ethnic leaders in gaining independence from the long British rule based on the condition that they would be given social, economic, and political rights within the new Union. Most tragically, this political promise is never respected and implemented. Far from respecting the Panglong Agreement signed by the Chin and other ethnic leaders in 1947, successive Burmese nationalist leaders always dominated all ethnic peoples and made explicit political maneuvers to consolidate all into "one race, one religion, and one language." In preventing all ethnic peoples from enjoying real political, religious, cultural, and economic freedom, Burmese military indiscriminately applies the policy of

Burmanization and Buddhization against the Chin and other ethnic minorities. The military coup staged on February 1, 2021 revealed the hard truth that Burmese military is never interested in relinquishing power to the civilian leadership and that it shows no seriousness for practicing genuine democracy or allowing ethnic peoples to have the right of self-determination. That being the case, the life of the Chin will continue to be characterized with prolonged suffering, dehumanization, and oppression in the way ahead. The contextual realities of the Chin, particularly the prospect of how they suffer and struggle for freedom and dignity in this looming circumstance, should be reflected in the content of the Trinitarian theology of freedom developed in conversation with Barth.

The history of the American Baptist missionaries stands as an important lesson for us, because it reminds us that Christianity cannot be separated from its sociopolitical context. With that in mind, I studied the lives and works of the missionaries for knowing how they were committed to preaching the Gospel while simultaneously engaging in practical social services. They introduced and presented Christianity in a way that aimed at transforming the religious, social, and cultural life of the Chin. Even as they did not explicitly mention how the Chin Christians would respond to or engage with their sociopolitical world, their act of presenting the Gospel in an inclusive way clearly implies that the Baptist missionaries did not tend to sever spirituality from its implication for the sociopolitical world. Following the example of outgoing missionary, local pastors and Christian leaders embraced Christianity as that which sustained them to preserve their ethnic and cultural identity in their long struggle under the Burmese military regime. The adoption and practice of Christianity led the Chin to acquire modern civilization and safeguarded them from being distorted by the hegemonic politics of Burmese

nationalism. Christianity has been thus known as the transforming source of the spiritual, social, and cultural life of the Chin. The ecumenical dimension of Chin Christianity has been but challenged since the rise of evangelicalism. The evangelical movement was welcomed and embraced as the source of Christian renewal in several senses, but its perspective of Christian engagement with the society was almost negative. While ecumenical Christians advocated for Christian participation in the sociopolitical matter, the evangelicals tended to separate spirituality from the real context of life, neglecting how they should relate to their society or live as redeemed Christians in the society. Although the support for the Christian participation in the sociopolitical world has been increasingly visible among the Chin today, mostly ecumenical Christians, the pervasive influence of evangelicalism still causes many Chin people to ignore their responsibility for the betterment of the social world. Meanwhile, the ecumenical churches are found to be less effective in inspiring the spiritual life of the ordinary Chin. Both groups are in need of upgrading their doctrinal positions. They have inherent Trinitarian problems, preventing them from effectively presenting the nature of the triune God in the suffering context of the Chin, and how to inspire Christians to actively interact with the society based on their faith in the triune God. Both trends show the tendency to misconceive how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit engage humanity on the basis of the indivisible and harmonious unity, causing them to lose sight of the belief that the triune God stands in solidarity with humanity and that this event serves as a transformative experience for humanity. The task of reclaiming a liberating and transformative role of Chin Christianity in the sociopolitical setting calls for both groups to reassess and reshape their Trinitarian misconceptions in light of their reading of Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom.

Barth well embodies in his practical life what his Trinitarian theology of freedom has in store. His perception of the Gospel stands as a motivating principle in his overall interaction with the sociopolitical environment. His break with modern liberal theology is conditioned by the conviction that this theology did not relevantly speak to the contextual needs of the people. His unconventional turn to the Bible as well as his embracing of dialectical theology declares that Barth perceives God as the God who intervenes and encounters the life of humanity in a transformative way. His faith in God serves as the source of inspiration for him to fight against social injustice, capitalism, racism, and authoritarianism. He was involved in the matter of the ecumenical movement where he spoke for the dehumanized and the oppressed. He was active in the cause of Christian healing and unity in the name of the Gospel. In this way, he untiringly urged Christian leaders to maximize the scale of their participation in the sociopolitical issues. His involvement in the church struggle is a reflection of his perception of the liberating Gospel. His conviction of the demand of the Gospel effectively draws him into the cause of struggling for the liberation and humanization of the oppressed. He clearly provided the example of how Christian might engage the sociopolitical world. The example of Barth's life tells that Christianity has a role to play in the sociopolitical environment, where it should be embroiled in the cause for the betterment and wellbeing of the human life. A close study on his life and work is thus necessary for understanding how he defines the life and action of the triune God.

His Trinitarian theology basically argues that the triune God chooses to be in solidarity with us in freedom and that the triune God gives us freedom based on our relationship with him. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit engage humanity on the

basis of their indivisible and distinct unity. God the Father is the loving God who freely turns to us in Jesus Christ. The life of the Son represents God's full identification with humanity. The real togetherness of God and humanity is realized in the life of the Son who chooses suffering and humiliation for the sake of humanity. The eternal God whom we have known in Jesus Christ is the God who determines himself to become God for us and to be present with us in freedom. The triune God exercises his freedom for turning toward humanity, and not the other way around. His emphasis on God's solidarity with humanity in its existential context implies that the triune God embraces the whole dimension of the human life. Such a Trinitarian discernment convinces us that the triune God takes up humanity in its totality. The triune God gives freedom to humanity, which in turn empowers it to live freely for God and for other humans. The Holy Spirit has been at work in us, creating relationship between God and us. In helping us to know the loving God, who encounters us in freedom, and renewing the work of the Son in us, the Holy Spirit makes us to grow into our relationship with the triune God. Barth's view of how the triune God stands in solidarity with us and gives us the gift of freedom to live for God and for our fellow human beings truly testifies that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit engage in the shared mission of recreating, redeeming, and transforming humanity.

Both evangelical and ecumenical Christians are called to reassess and reshape their Trinitarian perceptions in light of the new understanding provided in Barth's view. They are required to overcome their tendency to separate the life and work of the triune God preceded by their connection with the ideology of "*mi*," which usually tempts them to interpret the Trinity in a divided and individualistic manner. Nevertheless, a liberating and transformative view of the Trinity is disclosed to us when we look at Barth's

Trinitarian theology, which effectively helps us to see the Trinity in a connected, mutual, and interdependent way. Such a Trinitarian approach assures us how the triune God embraces us in our world and how he gives us the freedom to live as redeemed children of God. The Chin evangelical and ecumenical Christians are invited to embrace the Trinity as the source of Christian freedom, which empowers us to live positively for the betterment of our sociopolitical world. The transformative role of Chin Christianity in the sociopolitical world is reclaimed, when its Trinitarian misconceptions are reshaped in light of Barth's Trinitarian logic, reaffirming God's solidarity with us as well as his act of giving freedom to us. In a nutshell, our study of Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom tells us that the triune God gets himself into solidarity with us in our struggle and that we need to use our God-given freedom for the betterment of our sociopolitical world.

Having identified how Barth's Trinitarian theology of freedom intersects the evangelical and ecumenical Trinitarian trends in Chin Christianity, I contend that the significance of Barth's life and thought for the Chin context can be observed in two ways – pastoral and political. First, Barth's Trinitarian logic depicting divine solidarity and presence with humanity in its existential world serves as a helpful pastoral incentive for inspiring hope, healing, and reassurance in the life of the suffering Chin, who have gone through the endless cycles of oppression, dehumanization, and humiliation in their sociopolitical life. Chin theologians and pastors should emphasize in their pastoral engagement with people how the triune God stands in solidarity with us while we are facing hopeless and desperation. At this point, the ecumenical churches should be more prepared to preach the Gospel in a way that transforms, assures, and builds up the worried life of the Chin. Second, Barth clearly indicates how we should interact our

sociopolitical world as Christians. Based on the conviction that Christians are given their freedom, which should be used for the betterment of the society, the Chin evangelicals should engage sociopolitical issues positively and should be actively involved in the humanizing work of the poor and the oppressed. Christian freedom is a freedom to be lived out in the real world for helping the dehumanized to gain their freedom, selfhood, and dignity. Leaving behind the tendency to separate from the sociopolitical world, the Chin evangelicals should go back to the nature of a liberating Christianity embodied in the examples of Barth and their missionaries. Chin Christianity will come to be known as transformative in its engagement with the sociopolitical world when it helps the Chin to be inspired by their perception of the Trinity, which reassures them of God's solidarity with them in their ongoing struggle and persuades them to exercise their God-given freedom in the cause for the liberation and humanization of the oppressed people.

As this thesis is basically structured to develop a new Trinitarian hermeneutic intended for helping the evangelical and ecumenical Christians to see that they need to acquire a new perception of the Trinity for dealing with their sociopolitical challenges, it cannot cover all theological topics and paradigms relevant to the Chin context. Beyond this, a close study on the intersection of evangelicalism and ecumenism in Chin Christianity should be seen as a worthy project to be pursued. That enterprise would create a new platform where both sides learn from each other and achieve deeper understanding and cooperation to engage the sociopolitical issues effectively. Second, an in-depth study on the Holy Spirit is a much-needed project for Chin Christianity. Such research would bring about a better awareness on how spirituality intersects society.

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