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Sons of God

Relatively few books have been written on the doctrine of adoption. One written a century ago by a well-known Scottish theologian of his day, Robert S. Candlish, provoked an unusual controversy within the limited confines of Scottish theology. His work was entitled *The Fatherhood of God* and was followed by a series of sermons entitled *The Sonship and Brotherhood of Believers*. But since those days all too little has been written on the subject. The reason is probably that the biblical idea of the Fatherhood of God has been changed into a form of universalism. If we are sons of God by nature where is the need of adoption?

Invariably when a great doctrine is misused there is a tendency for it to be devalued. Thus evangelical preaching has lacked emphasis on Divine Fatherhood and the corresponding experience of sonship because of an unspoken fear of appearing to preach universalism. Other reasons can be found for this unhappy state of affairs. Often in the study of Christian doctrine, adoption or sonship has been treated as virtually the same as either justification or regeneration. It is therefore important to state at the outset that adoption is not justification, nor is adoption the same thing as regeneration.

Not justification. Some theologians have spoken of adoption as 'the positive element' in justification. Undoubtedly the New Testament never separates justification and adoption, but neither does it confuse them. In human terms it is quite possible to imagine a man being justified without the remotest thought of his being adopted. The fact that a judge pronounces the verdict of 'not guilty' does not commit him to take the accused to his home and allow him all the privileges of his son! Few men would strive for a place on the bench under those circumstances! Rather the different terminology Scripture uses is intended to enlarge our understanding of the multi-coloured grace of God (1 Pet. 4:10). When the light of the gospel passes through the prism of biblical language we find that it is broken up into many constituent parts, each with its own beauty and glory. Adoption emphasises an element in our relationship with God which is not present in justification.

Not regeneration. Adoption is not regeneration. The apostles distinguished these things in their writings. The apostle John is the supreme example of this: to those who were 'born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God', God 'gave the right to become children' (Jn. 1:12-13). Here two things are involved in bringing us to sonship. We are born again, and thus given the nature of sons, but we are also given an adoptive right so that we have a true status as sons commensurate with our new nature. This is made a little clearer in 1 John 3:1: 'How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!' John's point is – we are called children because adopted; but this is not a title which has no bearing upon our actual experience. It is a title which is matched in our hearts by the work of regeneration. God has done what no human can do – in adopting us he has also given us the nature of our Father (2 Pet. 1:4). But, like justification, adoption is not subject to degrees of more or less. Rather it expresses the new status that God has given us, the experience of which will only

be fully known in glory when we will perfectly bear the image of Christ (Rom. 8:19, 23; 1 Jn. 3:2).

Understanding adoption should mean that our own sense of the great goodness and love of God is immeasurably enriched.

THE MEANING OF ADOPTION

Adoption or sonship is an exclusively Pauline word although, as we have already noted, the idea of being a son is found elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul uses the expression in Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5, and in Romans 8:15, 23; 9:4. But the idea is also present every time we read of the Fatherhood of God. His is the regenerating power which plants the divine seed in our hearts (1 Jn. 3:9). His is the declaration which makes us his sons and daughters.

The background of adoption. Where did this idea of adoption come from? In the family life of the Old Testament no legal provision was made for adoption. Family structures were of such a nature that it was virtually unnecessary. Israel was seen as God's son (e.g. Hos. 11:1 ff.). But this was an act of creation on God's part, not of adoption. Even when the Old Testament speaks of the king as God's son, the picture is probably not drawn from this family background.

Adoption in the New Testament is probably to be seen against the background of Roman Law with which the apostle Paul (as a Roman citizen – Acts 22:27-9; 23:27) would be so familiar. In Roman society, unlike our own, the purpose of adoption in law was not to safeguard the rights and privileges of the child but was exclusively thought of in terms of the benefits and blessings which the adopter received. (Of course in our own society adopting parents reap great benefits, and rightly so, but these are never seen to be the main purpose of adoption in which the law is concerned for the child.) There are instances of people benefiting in this way by adopting a person much older than themselves with a view to receiving an inheritance! Adopting

someone younger was also seen as a valuable way to guard against the inevitable rigours and burdens of old age! Interestingly Paul uses the idea of adoption exclusively in letters directed to areas under the rule of Roman Law (Galatia, Ephesus and Rome itself). This Roman background serves to remind us that even the highest privileges of the Christian's experience do not have his own happiness as their only goal. They all eventually lead to the honour and glory of God. In the adoption of sons and daughters he restores for himself that glory of the image of his Son which was marred and shattered at the Fall.

The Act of Adoption. What then was involved in adoption? There were two basic transactions. The old authority under which the individual stood had to be broken. He was then formally brought under the new authority. Even when the New Testament does not use the language of adoption these ideas appear. The legally established dominion of sin has to be broken. The strength of sin is the law (1 Cor. 15:56). Sin uses it as a fulcrum to lever its way into the life of man (cf. Rom. 5:20; 7:7-13). Sin also claims a legal right to dominion over man because by his disobedience he has forfeited his liberty. That authority of the powers of darkness must be broken if a lasting adoption is to be possible. This God has done in Christ (cf. Rom. 6:1-14). But that is not enough. God inaugurates us into a new relationship with himself by adopting us into his family and bestowing upon us the rights and privileges of true children of God. In fact one of the points which R. S. Candlish daringly affirmed in *The Fatherhood of God* was that the only difference between our enjoyment of sonship and Christ's was that Christ enjoyed the privileges of sonship before we do, but not in a different manner. It is not difficult to see why his statement caused so much controversy. What was, and remains difficult to see, is how it can be demonstrated that this is contrary to Scripture. Perhaps Candlish went beyond what is written, but it is not easy to show that he went against what is written. His motive of

raising our eyes to the amazing privileges of our sonship was itself laudable enough:

*Behold th' amazing gift of love
the Father hath bestow'd
On us, the sinful sons of men,
to call us sons of God!*

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ADOPTION

In studying justification earlier we saw that the way of salvation in both Old and New Testaments was the same, by grace through faith. Any other interpretation would have disastrous effects on the way we read Scripture and on our understanding of the character of God. But it is possible to understand this unity in such a way that we lose the balance of Scripture. There is a profound difference between the clarity and fulness of revelation and experience in the days of the Old Covenant by contrast with the days of the New Covenant. That difference does not lie either in the reality of salvation or in the way of salvation (1 Pet. 3:20; Rom. 4:18-25). It lies in the fulness of the experience of grace possible. There is not only continuity between the promise in the Old Testament and its fulfilment in Christ, there is incalculable increase of blessing. The believers in the Old Testament could not reach maturity apart from us, says the writer of Hebrews (Heb. 11:40).

One of the ways in which this is seen is in the division of time about which the New Testament speaks. In Romans 3:21, after cataloguing the condemning words of God about men's sin, Paul tells us that something new has taken place: 'But now a righteousness from God . . . has been made known' (Rom. 3:21). Through Christ the blessing of God promised to Abraham comes to the Gentiles (Gal. 3:14) and a better covenant with better promises is inaugurated (Heb. 8:6 ff.).

But the main distinction lies in the character of fellowship with God. Even at their highest the saints in the Old Testament

never rose to a settled personal relationship to God defined and enjoyed in terms of individual sonship and personal Fatherhood. Scholars have often pointed out the novelty and uniqueness of Jesus' teaching precisely here. It is this that characterises the advance in experience of the new era, and leads to the summit of spiritual experience. Think of the privilege of calling the Creator of the ends of the earth, 'Abba, Father'. It defies comprehension and calculation. That is why there are few pictures more moving than the application of Isaiah 8:18 to Jesus in Hebrews 2:13. There he is pictured among the worshipping people of God, as the leader of their worship. He extends his hands towards his Father. He sings God's praise and rejoices in the fellowship of his people, saying: 'Here am I, and the children God has given me.'

This fellowship is the fruit of the ministry of the Spirit as well as of the work of Christ. When Jesus speaks about 'streams of living water', John adds, 'By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified' (*Jn. 7:38-9*). All translations convey John's meaning, but they do not often succeed in conveying the strength of his expression. For his words literally read: 'Up to that time the Spirit *was not*.' Naturally, John does not mean to suggest the non-existence of the Spirit (*cf. Jn. 1:32-4*). What he emphasises is the radical distinction between those days in our Lord's ministry and the day of the Spirit which was yet to be. Later in the Gospel the significance of this is drawn out more fully. When Jesus leaves the disciples, he will not leave them 'desolate' (*Jn. 14:18 R.S.V.*). The Greek word is *orphanos*, and the N.I.V. rightly translates it as 'orphans'. What the disciples are learning is that when God's Spirit comes, he will come in all the grace of Jesus himself. But he will come also as the One who will bring them a consciousness that they have a Father in heaven who cares for them. What Jesus had taught in the Sermon on the Mount about the Fatherhood of God they will now discover in their experience through the ministry of the Spirit (*cf. Matt.*

6:5-14, 25-32). Just as Jesus uniquely spoke of God as his Father, so when the Spirit of Jesus comes to abide for ever in the hearts of the disciples, they will know in a totally new way what it is to cry, 'Abba, Father' (*Rom. 8:15*).

In fact, we do not rightly understand what a privilege adoption is until we have some appreciation of the ministry of the Spirit as 'the Spirit of adoption'.

THE SPIRIT OF ADOPTION

In two places Paul speaks of the special relationship between the Spirit and our experience of adoption. In Galatians 4:1-7, he describes the new thing God has done in bringing into being the new covenant. In Romans 8:12-27, he speaks of the personal experience of the Spirit as the Spirit of adoption:

Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship [adoption]. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children . . .

The Romans had already known a 'spirit that makes you a slave again to fear'. Paul is probably speaking of the days when they were conscious of the deep conviction of sin which made them realise their bondage and engendered a feeling of terror at their condition. But through the gospel this has been dispelled and they have received the Spirit of sonship. They have now entered into the blood-bought privileges of brotherhood to Christ and sonship to God.

Marks of the Spirit's presence. There are four marks of the presence of this Spirit in adoption.

(i) *We are led by the Spirit of God* (*Rom. 8:14*). Just as a father provides guidelines for his children (and in a sense they may find the spirit of their father is the determining factor in many of their characteristic responses to life-situations), so in a much

more profound sense the Spirit of God is the guide of the children of God: 'those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God' (*Rom. 8:14*). But the leading of which Paul speaks has a very clear and definite content here. It is connected intimately with the help the Spirit is said to give in verse 13, to 'put to death the misdeeds of the body'. The guidance the Spirit provides is that of clear-cut opposition to sin. To claim to experience the ministry of the Spirit of adoption and yet to dally with sin is to be gravely deceived. The Spirit of adoption is the same Person as the Spirit of holiness of whom Paul had earlier spoken (*Rom. 1:4*). His presence brings a new attitude to sin. Where that new attitude is present, he is present.

(ii) *We cry 'Abba, Father'* (*Rom. 8:15*). This is a point at which widespread misunderstanding has arisen. It is sometimes suggested that the evidence of the presence of the Spirit of adoption and the assurance he brings will be a spirit of tranquil resting in the presence of God. No doubt there is such blessing brought to us by the Spirit of God. But it is not such an experience that is being described in Romans 8:15. Paul speaks here about the Christian crying 'Abba, Father!' The verb he uses is *krazein*, and in the New Testament it denotes a loud cry, often a cry or shriek of anguish (*cf. Mk. 15:39*, our Lord's cry on the Cross; *Rev. 12:2*, a woman in childbirth). The picture is not that of the believer resting quietly in his Father's arms in child-like faith, but of the child who has tripped and fallen crying out in pain, 'Daddy, Daddy'. That cry is the mark of the presence of the Spirit of adoption, not least because it shows that in time of need it is towards our Father in heaven that we look.

(iii) *The witness of the Spirit* (*Rom. 8:16*) is one of the most difficult phrases of all rightly to interpret, and yet there is a measure of truth in John Wesley's father's exhortation to him to seek it as 'the real proof of Christianity'. Often it has been interpreted as a mystical inner voice which speaks comfort and assurance to the believer. By others it is understood as referring to the testimony of Scripture in which alone the Spirit of God speaks to man. It seems best to understand Paul to mean that

this co-witness of the Spirit appears in our experience of the other evidences of sonship, namely mortification of the sin which would displease our Father, and application to his Fatherly care in times of need. In these very experiences, Paul is saying, the Spirit is actively confirming us in our sense of sonship.

(iv) *The Spirit of adoption indwelling us means that in this life the believer groans!* (*Rom. 8:23*). Not only does creation groan (*v. 22*), and the Spirit himself apparently groans (*v. 26*), but we ourselves groan. This is not the groaning of the believer in his struggle to mortify sin as in verse 13. The 'groans' of Romans 8 are more prospective in character. The creation 'groans' as it looks forward to a future liberty; the Spirit groans as he looks forward to his ministry producing answered prayer; the believer groans for an ever fuller experience of salvation.

We can honestly sing with Isaac Watts:

*The men of grace have found
Glory begun below;
Celestial fruit on earthly ground
From faith and hope may grow.*

We enjoy this great salvation now, through the Spirit. But the Spirit 'is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession' (*Eph. 1:14; cf. Rom. 8:23*). We do not experience 'full salvation' here and now. So we 'groan' longing for the day when we will drink to the full of the rivers of living water which we have already begun to taste.

Only in so far as we have a measure of this experience do we know what it is consciously to sense that we are children of God and enjoy the ministry of 'the Spirit of adoption'. When we do we also discover that being God's children brings responsibilities as well as privileges.

PRIVILEGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

(i) *A new status.* We now belong to the family of God in all ages and from every nation under the sun. There is nothing

like this fellowship in human society. We are given a new name, as sons of God, and are not children of the devil (*1 Jn. 3:10*), or sons of disobedience (*Eph. 5:6*), or children destined for wrath (*Eph. 2:3*). On the contrary we have extended to us the privileges and pleasures of our Father's home – access to his presence, familiarity with him (which basically means 'belonging to the same family'), boldness and liberty to come to him, and a knowledge that his Fatherly hand will work all things together for the good of all his children.

The corresponding responsibility is to become like him, and in particular to emulate his love for all his children and therefore treat our fellow-Christians with love and affection, with open-heartedness and tender devotion. The recognition that we have brothers and sisters in Christ, objects of his love as we ourselves are, should stimulate a deep personal care for them. How easily we lose sight of that!

(ii) *A new sense of God's care.* We meditate too little on the profound truth expressed so simply by Jesus: 'Your Father knows what you need before you ask him' (*Matt. 6:8*). How long it took Peter before he was able to pass this word on out of personal experience! Yet eventually he was able to encourage every generation of Christians with his exhortation: 'Cast all your anxiety upon him because he cares for you' (*1 Pet. 5:7*).

Our responsibility is therefore to lay aside all our anxieties. We must bring them to our Father, and, assured of his care, leave them with him.

(iii) *A new sense of destiny.* Our ultimate privilege lies in the future, for although we already experience our inheritance as joint-heirs with Christ, there is more yet to come! Thus Paul relates the thought of adoption into God's family to the whole chain of God's saving activity which will be completed only in glory (*Eph. 1:5, 11, 14*). The responsibility of such a prospect

clearly marked out for us: 'Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he [Christ] is pure' (*1 Jn. 3:3*). To know that we are God's adopted children is to be constrained to exhibit his character, since one day we will live forever in his home. If that is so, we should be willing to share the pattern of life of Christ our Elder Brother, for

If we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

Romans 8:17

If we endure,
we will also reign with him.

2 Timothy 2:12