

Adoption

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ADOPTION is concerned with the Fatherhood of God in relation to the redeemed. But it is necessary to preface our discussion by distinguishing the several kinds of divine Fatherhood found in Scripture.

1. *Intertrinitarianism*

This is the exclusive property of the Father in relation to the Son in the mystery of the Trinity. It is immanent, eternal, and exclusive. No other person of the Trinity shares it and in reference to the Sonship involved no man or angel participates in it. This uniqueness is expressed in the *monogenes* title as applied to Christ and in such expressions as the Father's own Son (Rom. 8:3, 32). This is the only Fatherhood that obtains in the *opera ad intra* and to think of it as belonging to the *opera ad extra* would deny its immanent and eternal character.

2. *Creative*

This is very seldom stated in terms of God's Fatherhood. But since it appears in such passages as Acts 17:28, 29; Hebrews 12:9; James 1:17, 18, we shall have to reckon with the fact that it is not improper to speak of God's creative relationship in terms of Fatherhood. Since all three persons of the Godhead were the agents of creation we cannot restrict this Fatherhood to the first person of the

Trinity but we must think of the Godhead as sustaining this relation to angels and men.¹

Other texts, besides those cited, might appear to express this same truth. But some of these are clearly irrelevant and others cannot be shown to have the creative relation in mind.

In Matthew 5:45-48 God is not called the Father of all. He is called the Father of the disciples and it is true that he as their heavenly Father bestows his kindness upon just and unjust. But the text carefully refrains from stating or implying that it is because God is the Father of all that he sends rain and makes his sun to rise upon evil and good.

In I Corinthians 8:6 — ‘but to us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we unto him’ — there is no mention of a fatherly relation to all men. It is simply an identification of the first person of the Godhead by his distinguishing trinitarian name, and there is in the text indeed no necessary reflection upon his fatherly relation to men. In accord with Paul’s usage it is the relation to the Son that is in view and, when he reflects on the fatherly relation to men, he calls him our Father.

Ephesians 3:1 — ‘the Father, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named’ — indicates that this cannot contemplate all mankind because it is restricted to the family of God.

Ephesians 4:6 — ‘One God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all, and in all’, must refer to the saints for of those specified as enjoying this relationship Paul proceeds to say, ‘But to each one of us has been given grace according to the measure of the free gift of Christ’. Besides, in verse 4 the delimitation is clearly indicated — ‘One body and one Spirit even as ye were called in one hope of your calling’.

Malachi 2:10 — ‘Have we not all one Father? hath not one God created us?’ — might seem to refer to creation and therefore to universal fatherhood. But it is characteristic of the Old Testament to use the language of creation with reference to the work of redemption. Compare especially Isaiah 43:1, 7, 9 where *bara* and *yatsar* are used plainly in a restrictive and redemptive sense (cf. Isaiah 64:8, 9). Besides, the latter part of Malachi 2:10 refers to the covenant of the fathers and indicates that the theocratic relationship to Israelis in view in the earlier part of the verse.

¹ T. J. Crawford: *The Fatherhood of God*, Edinburgh 1868; R. S. Candlish: *The Fatherhood of God*, Edinburgh 1865; R. A. Webb: *The Reformed Doctrine of Adoption*, Grand Rapids, r.i. 1947; J. Scott Lidgett: *The Fatherhood of God*, Edinburgh 1902; John Kennedy: *Man’s Relation to God*, Edinburgh, 1869.

It is noteworthy, therefore, how infrequently the creative relation is expressed in terms of fatherhood. Nowhere is God expressly called the Father of all men. Hence the concept of universal fatherhood, if used at all, must be employed with great caution and it is particularly necessary not to confuse this rare use of the term Father with the frequent use of the same term as it is applied to the redeemed.

In Luke 3:38 the word *huios* does not actually occur but it may be understood as carried over from verse 24 where the genealogy begins with *on huios, hos enomizeto, Ioseph, tou Elei tou Matthat*. This does not prove however that God may be regarded as the Father of all men in the sense in which he was the Father of Adam, for two reasons.

(i) The emphasis seems to be upon the fact that Adam owed his origin to God as no other man did. Adam was not generated by a human father.

(ii) Adam might have been a son of God by creation, but not in his fallen state. We might concede that Adam as created was a son of God without conceding that all men since the fall are sons of God. We must distinguish between Adam's sonship and the sonship of adoption. The latter entails a security that Adam did not possess.

3. *Theocratic Fatherhood*

This refers to God's adoption of Israel as his chosen people. It is the prototype of redemptive adoption as the Old Testament counterpart. Exodus 4:22, 23; Deuteronomy 14:1 2; cf. 1:31; Deuteronomy 32:5, 6, 20; Isaiah 43:6; cf. Isaiah 1:2; Isaiah 63:16; Hosea 11:1; Malachi 1:6; Malachi 2:10; Romans 9:4.

This is not the exclusive property of the first person.

4. *Adoptive Fatherhood*

This must be distinguished from the fatherhood of the preceding caption, not because it is principally different but because it is the full-fledged sonship in distinction from the nonage sonship in the Old Testament period. The distinction is clearly drawn by Paul in Galatians 3:23-4:6. The difference is in line with the difference in general between the Old Testament and the New; the Old is preparatory, the New is consummatory. The Old is prepadeutic, the New is gradulatory. The children of God in the Old Testament were as children under age. The grace of the New Testament appears in this that by redemption accomplished and by faith in him all without exception are introduced into the full blessing of sonship without the necessity of undergoing a period of tutelary preparation corresponding to the tutelary discipline of the Old Testament period. That is to say, New Testament believers from among Gentiles do not have to undergo in the realm of their individual development a preliminary period which

corresponds to the Old Testament period in the broad sphere of progressive revelation and realization. There is no recapitulation in the individual sphere of what obtained in the realm of dispensational progression.

BIBLICAL TERMINOLOGY

The Greek term for adoption is *huiothesia* — Romans 8:15; 8:23; Galatians 4:5; Ephesians 1:5 (cf. Rom. 9:4). The most important passages in the New Testament bearing upon adoption are John 1:12, 13; Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 4:4-7; Ephesians 1:5; I John 3:1 2, 10.

The words used in the New Testament to express the thought of sonship in relation to God are *huios*, *teknon*, *teknion*² and *paidion*; *pais*, though used on several occasions with reference to Christ and on two occasions with reference to David (Luke 1:69; Acts 4:25) is not used to express the relation with which we are now concerned.

Paidion is the regular word for child and is used of this relation in Hebrews 2:13, 14 — cf. Isaiah 8:18 — *teknion* — cf. John 13:33; I John 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7 (some mss. *paidia*), 18; 4:4 5:21.

The standard terms are however *huios* and *teknon*. John uses *teknon* almost exclusively. Only in Revelation 21:7 does he use *huios*, in quoting 2 Samuel 7:14. Paul uses both *huios* and *teknon*. Romans 8:14-21 provides an interesting example of the facility with which Paul can pass from the one term to the other. *Teknon* is derived from *tiktein* which means to bear or bring forth. *Tekna* is the usual word for children in the New Testament and is used of both sexes, that is of son or daughter (cf. Luke 15:31; 16:25; Acts 7:5).

THE NATURE OF ADOPTION

Since *teknon* is derived from *tiktein* we might readily suppose that the word *tekna* would reflect upon divine parentage by generation. Much plausible support might appear to be derived from the fact that *tekna* is the common word for children in the New Testament and in reference to parents the birth from these parents is

² It is questionable if *teknion* is used to express this relationship. Jesus uses it (John 13:33) and it may not here reflect upon the adoptive relationship but be a term of endearment. John has almost a monopoly since outside John it appears only in Galatians 4:19 where Paul addresses believers as *teknia mou* and the proper text is probably *tekna mou*. In John's usage it is a term of endearment as in John 13:33 (in addition to these occurrences all the instances are I John 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21.) In this respect it is like *paidion* in John 21:5; I John 2:13, 18 and possibly I John 3:7 though the revised text reads *teknia*.

generally presupposed as that which constitutes the relation implied in the use of the term. Furthermore, in Johannine usage so much emphasis falls upon the fact that those who are begotten of God bear the lineaments of him who has begotten them that we might readily conclude that in the background of the term *teknon* is the assumption that they are children by divine begetting.

We must not, however, take for granted that the word *teknon*, because of its derivation or because of other assumptions which attach to its ordinary use, implies that we become children of God by regeneration or that it expressly reflects upon sonship as constituted by regeneration. Although it has been maintained in this connection that we become children of God both by deed of adoption and by participation of nature, it is not by any means so apparent that regeneration is to be coordinated with adoption as the way by which we become sons of God. We must appreciate the fact that the deed of adoption is clearly set forth in the New Testament, and it is apparent that adoption is quite distinct from regeneration. We may never think of sonship as being constituted apart from the act of adoption. If we should think of sonship as constituted by regeneration simply and solely then we should be doing serious prejudice to the necessity and the fact and the distinctive grace of adoption. And not only so. It is questionable if the generative act of God in regeneration is to be construed as an aspect of God's grace by which we are constituted sons of God. One other consideration may be mentioned in this connection. As will be noted later, it is to God the Father specifically and *par excellence* that the children of God sustain this relationship. It is God the Father who is our Father in heaven. We should expect then that it is by an action which is pre-eminently that of the Father that this relation is constituted. But regeneration is pre-eminently the act of the Holy Spirit. In any case, even if we allow that regeneration is to be coordinated with adoption as an ingredient in the total action by which we become sons of God, yet it is adoption that must be regarded as the distinctive and definitive act by which this relation is constituted. This is to say, that the privilege and status of sonship is not acquired simply by a subjectively operative action but by what must be called, by way of distinction, a judicial act that has its affinities with justification rather than with regeneration or sanctification. Calling, regeneration, pardon and justification are presupposed, and adoption supervenes upon the condition and status established by these other acts of God and initiates a status and introduces to a privilege which calling, regeneration and justification enlarged to the fullest extent do not themselves define or explicate. The case might be stated thus. Redemption contemplates and secures adoption as the apex of privilege. Calling ushers into the fellowship of God's Son. Regeneration effects that principial conformity to the image of God in righteousness and holiness. Justification accords acceptance with God as righteous and gives the title to the eternal life which the righteousness imputed demands. Sanctification prepares the people of God for the full and consummate enjoyment of the inheritance to which adoption entitles, the heirship of God. But it is in the act of adoption that God becomes to the redeemed a Father in the highest sense that divine Fatherhood can belong to creatures, or, rather, can be predicated of creatures.

We may not, however, rule out the significance of regeneration in connection with the sonship constituted by adoption. Regeneration it is that generates them anew after the image of God so that the adopted may be imbued with the disposition which is consonant with the responsibilities and privileges and prerogatives belonging to the status of adoption.

Now it is significant in this connection that not only do we have the explicit teaching of Paul to the effect that there is the adoptive act (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1 :5), derived from the notion of a legal act whereby a person who is not a natural son is received into the rights and privileges of a son, but even in the teaching of John there is reflection upon the distinctive action by which we become sons of God. In John 1:12 he speaks of giving authority to become sons of God. Sonship, he indicates, is instituted by the bestowment of a right and this is to be distinguished from the regeneration spoken of in verse 13. When we apply John's own teaching elsewhere to this passage we are compelled to discover the following progression of logical and causal relationship — regeneration (v. 13), the reception of Christ, the bestowment of authority, and becoming thereby children of God (v. 12). It is very likely that this same thought is alluded to in I John 3:1-3, 'Behold what manner of love the Father hath given to us that we should be called children of God, and we are'. Several things are to be noted. (1) It is the Father who is in view as the agent. (2) The Father bestows this privilege (*dedoken* — the same verb as in John 1:12). (3) The calling, whether it reflects on our being named children of God or contains a more efficient idea, that of being effectually called into being as sons of God, stresses the dignity of the status. (4) The emphasis upon the marvel of the Father's love points to the status contemplated as that which in the realm of possession is the apex and epitome of grace. (5) It is a present possession and not simply a future attainment. (6) The status insures that in the future we shall be conformed to his image and will enjoy the beatific vision.

In a word, the representation of Scripture is to the effect that by regeneration we become members of God's kingdom, by adoption we become members of God's family. And it may not be forgotten that on the only occasion in which this concept of the family of God is expressly mentioned in the New Testament, it is God the Father who is in view.

'For this cause', says Paul, 'I bow my knees unto the Father, of whom the whole family in heaven and upon earth is named' (Eph. 3:14, 15).³

THE SPIRIT OF ADOPTION

³ cf. James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification*, pp. 262f. John Kennedy, op. cit., pp. 147f.

The grace of adoption embraces not only the bestowment of the status and privilege of sons but also the witness of the Spirit to the fact (Rom. 8:15, 16; Gal. 4:6). This includes, as we found already, two elements:

(1) the creation and fostering within us of the filial affection and confidence which is the reflex in our consciousness of the status; (2) the conjoint witness of the Spirit to our spirits. The act of adoption is necessary to the possession of the prerogative of sons; the Spirit of adoption to the cultivation of these prerogatives and the fulfillment of the correlative obligations. It is the Spirit of adoption who produces the highest confidence that it is given to men to exercise in relation to God. The people of God thereby recognize not only Christ as their Redeemer and Saviour, high priest and advocate at God's right hand, not only the Holy Spirit as their sanctifier and advocate, not only the Father as the one who has called them into the fellowship of his Son but also as the one who has instated them in his family, and they enter into the holiest in the assurance that he, the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, will own them and bless them as his *own* children. No approach to God par-takes of comparable intimacy, confidence, and love with that of the simple, yet unspeakably eloquent, 'Abba, Father'. And they accept all the dispensations of his providence as those of the all-wise, all-holy, and all-loving Father in heaven. It is not without significance that the acme of privilege and the highest outreach of confidence toward God that flows from it should be directly attached to that which is pre-eminently and distinctively the action of the Father in the counsel of redemption, namely, election and predestination. 'In love having predestinated us unto adoption' (Eph. 1:5). Here we have the ultimate source and the highest privilege brought together. And in the consciousness of the sons of God it is inevitable that the assurance of the one should go hand in hand with the recognition of the other. The confidence implicit in the address 'Abba, Father' is one that draws to itself the assurance of predestinating love and these mutually support and encourage each other.

Finally, we may not overlook the example furnished in this matter of inter-trinitarian cooperation. It is the Father who sends the Spirit of adoption into the hearts of his children. It is to the end of ensuring the recognition and cultivation of the relation established by the Father and to the Father. And the activity of the Spirit is directed to the inducing of faith and love which have God the Father as their object in the particularity of his fatherly identity. It is the Father whom the Holy Spirit brings into the focus of the believer's faith, confidence, and love.

THE TITLE 'FATHER'

It has been assumed that it is God the Father who stands in this particular relationship to the sons of God. What is the evidence supporting this conclusion?

1. The title 'Father' is the distinguishing title of the first person of the Godhead; it points to his incommunicable property. There is a certain presumption arising

from this fact that the title as it applies to a divine relation to men would have in view that person who is distinctively the Father. In other words it would seem appropriate that the person who is Father should sustain to men the fatherly relation that is constituted through the mediation of the Son.

2. In John 20:17 Jesus said to Mary Magdalene, to tell the disciples 'I ascend unto my Father and your Father'. When he says 'my Father' he must mean the first person of the Trinity. In the usage of our Lord 'Father', 'the Father', 'my Father' always refers to the first person. And the same person must likewise be in view when he says 'your Father'. The coordination would require this inference. Besides, it is to 'the Father' he *ascended* and this is also said to be an ascension to the person who is identified as the disciples' Father. Here, therefore, without question 'the Father' is in view in the fatherly relation which God sustains to the disciples.

3. Jesus very frequently calls the first person 'my Father who is in heaven' in slightly variant forms:

ho pater mou ho ouranios
ho pater mou ho en tois ouranois
ho pater mou ho en ouranois
ho pater mou ho epouranios

He likewise speaks to the disciples of 'your Father who is in heaven' (Matt. 5:16, 45, 48; 6:1; 7:11; Mark 11:25, 26). The similarity of expression would naturally lead us to think that the same person is in view in both cases, even though Jesus never includes the disciples with him-self and speaks of 'our Father who is in heaven'.

4. In the New Testament epistles the title 'the Father' is the personal name of the first person, as also quite frequently *ho theos*. The expression or its close parallel 'The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:3; 11:31; Eph. 1:3; Col. 1:3; I Pet. 1:3) is un-questionably the first person. Likewise, 'God the Father' (Gal. 1:1; Eph. 6:23; Phil. 2:11; I Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:2; I Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Tit. 1:4; Jas. 1:27(?); I Pet. 1:2; 2 Pet. 1:17; 2 John 3; Jude 1; Rev. 1:6). In nearly all these instances the Father is distinguished from the Son and in I Peter 1:2 from the Holy Spirit.

When we examine similar instances in the epistles where God is called the Father of believers we have close similarity of expression.

Romans 1:7: 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' and the same in I Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; Philippians 1:2; Philemon 3.

Galatians 1:4: 'According to the will of God and our Father'.

Philippians 4:20: 'But to God and our Father be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.'

Colossians 1:2: 'Grace to you and peace from God our Father.'

I Thessalonians 1:3: 'before God and our Father'.

I Thessalonians 3:11: 'But God himself and our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ'.

I Thessalonians 3:13: 'before God and our Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ'.

2 Thessalonians 1:1: 'to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'

2 Thessalonians 2:16: 'But our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father . . . comfort your hearts'.

But there is not only the similarity of expression between these instances and the others where God is called the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ but, even more significantly, when God is denominated 'our Father' the person contemplated is clearly distinguished from the Lord Jesus Christ in most of the instances quoted. And this conclusively shows that the person in view is God the Father as distinguished from the Son.

On these grounds we must infer that when God is contemplated in terms of adoption as 'our heavenly Father' it is the first person of the Trinity, the person who is specifically the Father, who is in view. This fact enhances the marvel of adoption. The Father is not only the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ but he is also the God and Father of those who believe in Jesus' name. The relation of God as Father to the Son must not be equated with the relation of God as Father to the adopted. Eternal generation must not be equated with adoption. Our Lord guarded this distinction most jealously in respect of relationship, address, and implication. He never included the disciples with himself or himself with the disciples in a common relationship designated 'our Father'. He never approached the Father in prayer with the disciples and said 'our Father'.

This is expressly marked in the word to Mary Magdalene. And the implications of the distinction are apparent in his word 'No one knoweth who the Father is but the Son' (Luke 10:22; cf. Matt. 11:27). But while the distinction must be recognized and guarded we must not fail to appreciate that which is common, namely, that it is the same God and Father who sustains this relation to the only-begotten in the uniqueness of the sonship that is his and to the redeemed in the

uniqueness of the sonship that belongs to them. This fact binds together the only-begotten and the sons by adoption in a bond of brotherhood. We could not dare to think of the relationship established in these terms unless we had the authority of Scripture. In Hebrews 2:11 (cf. Matt. 12:50; John 20:17; especially the latter when Jesus says 'Go to my brethren'.) we read, 'For both he that sanctifieth and they who are being sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren', and then the writer appeals to Psalm 22:22; Isaiah 8:17, 18. The passage speaks of the sons to be brought to glory (v. 10 — *pollous huious eis doxan agagonta*), of the children whom God had given (v. 13 *paidia*), and of the children (*paidia*) as partakers of blood and flesh (v. 14). We shall have to infer that the 'all of one' (*ex henos pantes*) refers to the fact that the Son (cf. 1:5), here designated the captain of salvation, and the sons to be brought to glory are of the Father and therefore together constituted a brotherhood by virtue of which the Son is not ashamed to call them brethren.

CONCLUSION

This doctrine of adoption is not only important in a positive way as setting forth the apex of redemptive grace and privilege, but it is also important negatively in that it corrects the widespread notion of the universal fatherhood of God and provides against its devastating implications. Though there is a sense in which the universal fatherhood may be maintained, yet to confuse this with adoptive fatherhood is to distort and even eviscerate one of the most precious and distinctive elements of the redemptive provision. For if we do not distinguish at this point it means one of two things; the denial of all that is specifically redemptive in our concept of the divine fatherhood, or the importation into the relation that all men sustain to God by creation all the privileges and prerogatives that adoption entails. On the former alternative God's fatherhood is emptied of all the rich content Scripture attaches to it. On the latter alternative we shall have to espouse universalism and the final restoration of all mankind.

It needs to be repeated that Scripture all but uniformly reserves the title Father as it respects men and the title son as it respects our relation to God for that relationship that is effected by the special act of God's grace that finds its place within the *ordo salutis*, namely, adoption. 'Adoption is an act of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God' (*Shorter Catechism*, Question 34).