

The doctrine of adoption is in the process of a long overdue comeback; one that promises a more exact understanding of what the Bible (specifically Paul) teaches: Eph. 1:5; Rom. 9:4; Gal. 4:4-5; Rom. 8:15, 23. As a Reformed/reforming Christian I welcome this, for no other wing of the church has done as much with the doctrine in either the pre- or post-Reformation eras (see, most notably, Calvin and the Westminster Standards). And yet, over recent centuries, the Calvinistic tradition has lost sight of adoption, chiefly because of our understandable, if somewhat short-sighted, preoccupation with our defence of justification. We have rightly stressed what we are saved from, but at the expense of what we are saved to.

To be clear about Paul's teaching we need, first, to cease the well-worn (Puritan) practice of confusing Paul's language of adoption with John's references to the new birth (notably Jn 1:12-13; 3:1-21; 1 Jn 2:28-3:3). The terms they use construct two distinctive filial or familial models (robust metaphors), which convey differing yet supplementary concepts of our salvation. Whereas John's model speaks of the birth of the children of God (*tekna tou theou*) into the kingdom – emphasising their subsequent growth into the image of the Son (*huios*) – Paul's refers to the adoption of God's (mature) sons into his family, and indicates the new status they have in Christ, and all that goes with it: acceptance, assurance, liberty, prayer, obedience and hope (the inheritance).

While the underlying concepts of each model (new life and free life respectively) contribute harmoniously to the one gospel, systematicians of our tradition, following the example of the Puritans, have mistakenly assumed that to express the unity of these concepts requires the conflation of their models. This is not so. We only have the right to mix biblical models when the Scripture itself does so, although to cease the practice will require a (much-needed) fresh approach to the systematisation of the Bible's theology; what elsewhere I have called 'biblical dogmatics'.

Clarity in understanding Paul's adoption model is gained, secondly, by grasping the coherence of his unique fivefold usage of *huios* (adoption as son). What determines the

importance he places on adoption is not the number of times he uses the Greek term, but the manner in which he utilises it. In fact, the five texts may be understood as markers along the line of redemptive history from the first to the last things (protology to eschatology). Each of these texts we shall consider in turn: Eph. 1:4-5; Rom. 9:4; Gal. 4:4-5; Rom. 8:15-16; 8:22-23.

The Planning of Adoption

'Sonship', counsels Herman Ridderbos, 'is not to be approached from the subjective experience of the new condition of salvation, but rather from the divine economy of salvation, as God foreordained it in his eternal love (Eph. 1:5), and realized it in principle in the election as his people.' Stated simply, adoption originated in the mind of God the Father.

It was for no other reason than 'the good pleasure of his will' (the *efficient* cause) that the Father predestined us to adoption. Notwithstanding all the perfection and fullness of reciprocated love that passed eternally between the persons of the Godhead – such that God need never have loved outside of himself in order to remain love – he voluntarily condescended to extend his love to the very 'offspring' (Acts 17:28) that would break loose from him and become 'sons of disobedience', 'children of wrath', inhabitants of the household of the living dead, and slaves to the Prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:1-3).

In predestination (the *material* cause of adoption) the Father named for himself a seismic family (Eph. 3:15). By, or literally through (*dia*), Christ (v. 5; cf. v. 7), he determined the transferral of the elect from the devil's household into his own. In time, the sons of disobedience would through faith (the *instrumental* cause) become the sons of God and experience his warm paternal embrace (*eis auton* v.5). Enough to say that the gospel begins with grace, but culminates hereafter in glory (the final cause): ours, but ultimately our Father's (v. 6).

The Privilege of Adoption

What was divinely planned in ages past was realised in history through the unfolding of God's covenantal

dealings with his people. To Abraham was given a divine promise that he would, through Christ (Gal. 3:18, 29), inherit the world (Rom. 4:13). Yet this promise only anticipated the adoption. In Romans 9:4 we learn – through the correspondence of two of Israel's six privileges under the old covenant: the adoption (*bé huiotbesia*) and the giving of the law (*bé nomotbesia*) – that it was not until Sinai, subsequent to Israel's redemption, that Yahweh adopted (the inaugurated nation of) Israel as his (corporate) son.

This thought would have sounded familiar to ancient Near Eastern ears, accustomed as they were to the employment of father-son imagery in the drafting of covenants. At that time, religions customarily regarded their gods as having consorts who bore them sons. Yet Yahweh, being without equal, had no consort, and no 'son' either. He thus, sovereignly and graciously, chose out insignificant Israel (Deut. 7:1, 7) to adopt as his own. But Israel was not to demean this adoptive sonship by comparing it negatively to the 'natural' sonship the surrounding people groups were said to enjoy to their gods. So special was Israel to Yahweh that he was treated as a firstborn son, replete with all the rights of primogeniture (Exod. 4:22; cf. Jer. 31:9). In Yahweh Israel found a Father dedicated to his welfare. Subsequent centuries were to prove this dedication, in the face of Israel's multiple childish rebellions (Hos. 11:1ff.; Mal. 2:10ff.).

The Reception of Adoption

With the coming of Christ (Gal. 4:4-5), Israel finally came of age. The Son's redeeming work at Calvary not only freed believing Israelites from the ceremonial laws (which had been used by the Father to educate him in his youth [Gal. 3:23-25; 4:1-3]), in fulfilment of Isaiah 56:1ff., Christ opened up God's household to the believing Gentiles he set free from their prior enslavement to pagan deities (4:8; cf. Eph. 2:11-22).

The Father adopts his redeemed by uniting them to Christ. By placing us in the Son (note *huiotbesia*: *huios* [son] plus *thesia* [from *tithemi* – 'to place']), we too become sons (hence Paul's use of masculine expressions, his reference to 'daughters' [2 Cor. 6:18] and 'children'

[Rom. 8:16, 17, 21; 9:8] notwithstanding). By this union we share with Christ an identity of relation to the Father, and enter into membership of his family (Eph. 2:19). Into our hearts the Father pours the Spirit of His firstborn. He it is who empowers us to call on God as our Father, irrespective of our ethnic origins (note the multi-cultural use of the Aramaic 'Abba' and the Greek '*pater*' [Father]). In fact, nothing demonstrates the profundity of our union with Christ more than this vocative we use when we pray. It is the same as our brother used in Gethsemane (cf. Gal. 4:6 with Rom. 8:15 and Mk 14:36)!

The Assurance of Adoption

The Father's adoptive act (acceptance) has brought us into the privileged adoptive state (sonship) we now experience. Whereas in Galatians 4 we are said to have the Spirit because we are sons, in Romans 8 the apostle says that we are sons because we have the Spirit (8:14). The Spirit of adoption ('sonship' [NIV]) assures us of our relationship to the Father. He does so, first, by counteracting the encroachment of the fear-producing spirit of bondage (cf. Gal. 5:18). Second, he helps us to enter boldly into our filial relationship. Having placed on our tongues, once-for-all, the filial language of prayer, the Spirit of the risen Christ (cf. Rom. 1:3-4), who resides in our hearts ever after, remains available to us as we learn how to cry (*kerazō*) with confidence to our Father (Gal. 4:6 and Rom. 8:15). He witnesses supernaturally and personally with our spirits (*summarturei*) that we are authentic children of God (*tekna theou* [v. 16]). This is not divine revelation, as he does not witness to our spirits. Nevertheless, his witness fulfils the biblical requirement of a dual/multiple testimony for the establishment of a truth (cf. 2 Cor. 13:1; Deut. 17:6, 19:15). This testimony was, incidentally, also required in the validation of contemporary Roman practices of adoption.

But why, having made so much of the maturation of the sons of God in the new covenant era, should Paul describe us in Romans 8 as children (*tekna* [cf. Phil. 2:15])? Is not the term more characteristic of John? True, but it is said that a Roman adoption was, existentially, like a new birth. The former slave was no longer just existing, but

alive and in possession of all the rights of his new family: freedom from debt and a share in the inheritance – hence Paul’s talk elsewhere of the Spirit as the downpayment/guarantee or pledge (*arrabôn*) of the inheritance (Eph. 1:14). The divine inheritance is unique. It does not, and cannot, require the death of the Father. Neither does he become decrepit or dependent on his children. There occurs no role reversal. His immortality knows no aging process. Thus, no matter how mature the sons of God become in these last days, they remain forever *tekna*, dependent on their heavenly Father.

The Consummation of Adoption

Adopted in principle from eternity past (Eph. 1:5); in the presence of God, when at Calvary the Son broke the chains of our enslavement; and in our consciences the moment we believe and are united to Christ in His Sonship; amid our present filial privileges and responsibilities (which space precludes us from unpacking), we continue to await expectantly the public proclamation of our adoption. ‘For we know’, writes Paul, ‘that the whole creation groans and labours with birth pangs together until now. And not only they, but we also who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body’ (Rom. 8: 22-23).

In Romans 8:17-23 Paul teaches, first, that the adoption coincides with glory. The pattern of Christ’s life – suffering now, glory later – is repeated in our lives. And while we know more about our sufferings than we do of the glory (*cf.* 1 Cor. 15), the apostle promises four things: (1) God’s people shall be glorified together with Christ; (2) the worst miseries of the present time cannot compare with the goodness of the superlative blessings of the coming glory; (3) the glory will be revealed in the sons of God; (4) it will shine forth in our full, perfect and eternal liberty (vv. 17, 18, 21).

Secondly, the adoption will entail the unveiling (‘revelation’) of God’s sons (v. 19). Some we think are brethren shall sadly turn out to be sons of disobedience, while others we fear are children of wrath shall be

unveiled as the Father’s (*cf.* Eph. 2:1-3). Blessed with a few droplets of the Spirit (Calvin), we groan with creation (as in labour rather than the throes of death), straining our necks to see who truly belongs to him. The adoption, that shall reveal all, will vindicate the patience and perseverance God’s authentic sons have shown amid the divine testing and diabolical persecution of the present age. Then, and only then, shall we be released from the current futilities. Our persevering shall have reached its end (that is, its termination as well as its *telos* [vv. 24-25]).

Thirdly, the consummation of adoption shall entail a commensurate consummation of our liberty (vv. 20-21). Presently, we are free only in part, and in our souls alone. What is more, the freedom we have may be undermined (*cf.* Gal. 5:1). When, however, creation is at last delivered from its enslavement to corruption, we shall know full, perfect, and eternal freedom in both our bodies and our souls. Redemption accomplished, both cosmically and psychosomatically! All enslavement shall be history. The full sum of the inheritance will be ours.

For now, we yearn for a better day, and shall continue to do so even as we sleep through Jesus (1 Thess. 4:14):

The communion in glory with Christ, which the members of the invisible church enjoy immediately after death, is, in that their souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, *waiting for the full redemption of their bodies*, which even in death continue united to Christ, and rest in their graves as in their beds, till at the last day they be again united to their souls. (Westminster Larger Catechism [Ans. 86])

The terminus of NT hope is not then, heaven in its ethereal intermediate state – where our short-sighted hopes often lie – but heaven in its final form: a redeemed creation full of divine presence, purged of the corruption of the present order, and home to all God’s family. Job well done, the Father’s perfect and unending family reunion begins. Its focus will be his glory; its promise – our enjoyment with Christ of the inheritance that grace alone requires our eternal Father to share; but its consolation will be our consummate psychosomatic liberties (v. 21) – of which, for now, we can but dream.