

Adoption: A Biblical and Theological Exposition of a Neglected Doctrine

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(I) A Neglected Doctrine

The doctrine of God’s gracious adoption of elect sinners has received inadequate treatment in the church.¹ In the early centuries Christ’s Deity and eternal sonship were the vital issues the fathers faced, rather than our adoptive sonship.² The Middle Ages made no significant development in adoption. However, even then the comfort of this doctrine was never completely lost, for, after all, the church has always prayed, “Our *Father* who art in heaven.” The Reformation, with its proclamation of the sovereign grace of God and justification by faith alone, made great advances in soteriology. With this glorious foundation, there was potential for significant progress regarding adoption.

Calvin does not give adoption a separate chapter in his *Institutes*, but he has a firm grasp of its importance and use in the church. For example, he links our sonship with prayer (3.20.36-38), election (3.24.1) and both the sacraments (4.15.1; 4.16.24; 4.17.1). In his lengthy list of the titles of the Holy Spirit, he places “the Spirit of adoption” first (3.1.3).³

¹ The standard works on the history of dogma have little to work with and so do not even deal with adoption.

² The *Nicene Creed* (325) does speak of “one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds ... who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary.” Although Christ’s eternal sonship and incarnation are necessary for our salvation, Nicea does not address how we receive the Son’s salvation — whether adoption plays a role in this or not. Nevertheless, it is suggestive.

³ Sinclair B. Ferguson’s explains Calvin’s statement in *Institutes* 3.1.3 that “the first title” of the Holy Spirit is the “Spirit of adoption,” even though the phrase itself is only found once in the Bible (Rom 8.15): “This is the single most important description of the Spirit because, in Calvin’s view, sonship is the most basic and comprehensive rubric for understanding the nature of the Christian life. This is all of a piece with the fact that Calvin places strong emphasis on the gospel as the means by which we come to know the fatherhood of God, in which He brings us into His family and makes us His children” (“Calvin and Christian Experience: The Holy Spirit in the Life of the Christian,” in Joel R. Beeke and Garry J. Williams (eds.), *Calvin, Theologian and Reformer* [Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010], p. 102; cf. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996], p. 182). Adoption runs like a golden thread through Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (especially book 3) and plays a significant part in

Adoption received little further development in the *Three Forms of Unity*. The *Belgic Confession* (1561) refers to God's fatherly love for us in its treatment of Providence (Article 13) and in connection with the acceptance of our prayers through Christ (26). In baptism, we are told, "our gracious God and Father" testifies to our salvation (34). Article 15, in speaking of Original Sin, teaches that the sins of the "children of God" are graciously forgiven.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* (1563) also speaks in various places of believers as God's children and of God as our Father. In Question and Answer 33, however, we have a clear statement relating our sonship to that of the eternal Son of God:

Q. 33. Why is Christ called the only begotten Son of God, since we are also the children of God?

A. 33. Because Christ alone is the eternal and natural Son of God; but we are children adopted of God, by grace, for his sake.

The treatment of the doctrines of grace at the *Synod of Dordt* (1618-1619) did not mark any progress upon *Heidelberg Catechism*, Question and Answer 33.⁴ In fact, the subject has received little treatment in continental Reformed theology. For example, Abraham Kuyper could write *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (1888), with only occasional brief references to adoption.⁵ With Herman Bavinck, his fellow Dutchman, this doctrine played a more significant role.⁶

One factor which led to the neglect of adoption in continental European theology was its being subsumed under justification, as a "part."⁷ In this regard, the *Westminster Standards*, which treat adoption as a separate locus, are to be preferred.⁸ However, even in *Westminster Standards* circles,⁹ adoption has received insufficient attention.¹⁰ In a nineteenth century

his theology, yet Robert A. Webb makes the astounding claim that Calvin "makes no allusion whatever to adoption" (*The Reformed Doctrine of Adoption* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1947], p. 16).

⁴ This, of course, was not an issue at the synod. The *Canons of Dordt*, however, relate adoption to "The Perseverance of the Saints" in the fifth head of doctrine.

⁵ Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, repr. 1975).

⁶ Cf. Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1956).

⁷ Cf. Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thompson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, repr. 1978), pp. 552-553.

⁸ Cf. *Westminster Confession* 12; *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 74; *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. & A. 34. The English divine, William Ames, Professor of Theology at Franeker in the Netherlands, was one on the continent who taught adoption as a separate locus (*The Marrow of Theology* [Durham, NC: The Labyrinth Press, repr. 1968], pp. 164-167).

⁹ This includes traditional Congregational and Baptist churches, which adopted modified versions: the *Savoy Declaration* (1658) and the *Baptist Confession of Faith* (1689), respectively.

¹⁰ Assessing the whole Presbyterian and Reformed world, James Green can state, "The doctrine of adoption has received scant recognition in theological discussions and pulpit dissertations. Some great treatises omit it altogether, others devote to it a few remarks, while scarcely any of them articulates it as a separate head in divinity" (*A Harmony of the Westminster Presbyterian Standards with Explanatory Notes* [USA: William Collins & World, 1976], p. 87).

debate, Scottish Presbyterianism has produced at least two works on the subject.¹¹ American Southern Presbyterianism has also weighed in with two significant treatments.¹²

It is clear that this doctrine deserves further attention; past work is not satisfactory in several respects; improvements can be made. This essay proposes to develop adoption along the lines of the *Westminster Standards*, by relating it to the inter-Trinitarian relations within the Godhead and to union with Christ.

(II) Adoption and the *Historia Salutis*

“Adoption,” states the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, “is an act of God’s free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have the right to all the privileges of the sons of God” (A. 34). By adoption, we are brought into the family of our heavenly Father and fellowship with Him as His dear children. But what is involved in being sons of God? In the history of redemption (*historia salutis*), the Scripture set forth two models, to help us to understand this unspeakable privilege. We shall follow the divine pedagogy.

(A) Adam — Original Sonship

(1) Sonship and Image

On the sixth day, as the culmination and crown of the creation, “God created man in his own image” (Gen 1.27). Though the opening chapters of Genesis nowhere explicitly state that Adam was God’s son, the New Testament makes this clear (Luk 3.38; cf. v. 23). There has been much confusion in the history of the Christian church, regarding the meaning of the image of God (*imago dei*). However, the Reformed confessions are undoubtedly correct, when, according to Scripture, they define the image of God as knowledge, righteousness and holiness (Col 3.10; Eph 4.24).¹³

Adam’s sonship and his carrying the *imago dei* stand or fall together.¹⁴ For the basis of this unity, we must consider the inter-Trinitarian relations within the Godhead, and, more specifically, the relationship between the First and Second Persons.

Since the Father eternally begets the Son and the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, He is the only begotten of the Father in the absolute sense (Joh 1.14, 18; 3.16; 1Joh 4.9). This is the key idea in their relation as *Father and Son*.

Scripture ascribes other names to the Son, such as the Word (Joh 1.1), the Effulgence of God’s glory (Heb 1.3) and the Image of God (2Cor 4.4). Although each of these titles helps us to understand something of the Son’s eternal generation, it is the last that concerns us here.¹⁵

¹¹ Thomas J. Crawford, *The Fatherhood of God* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1867); Robert S. Candlish, *The Fatherhood of God* (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1870).

¹² John L. Girardeau, “The Doctrine of Adoption,” in *Discussions of Theological Questions* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, repr. 1986), pp. 428-521; Robert A. Webb, *Op. cit.*

¹³ *Belgic Confession* 14; *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 6; *Canons of Dort* III/IV:1; III/IV:R:2; *Westminster Conf.* 4:2.

¹⁴ Cf. Samuel E. Waldron: “the idea of image-bearing is intimately connected with that of sonship” (*A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* [Great Britain: Evangelical Press, 1989], p. 166).

¹⁵ Cf. Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: RFP, 1966), pp. 145-150.

In that Christ is the Image of God, we learn that the Father, in eternally generating the Son, begets Him in His own likeness. The infinite, eternal, unchangeable, wise, powerful, holy, just, good and true Father expresses Himself perfectly in His Image, the Son, who is infinite, eternal, unchangeable, wise, powerful, holy, just, good and true.¹⁶

Thus when God the Father through the Son and by the Spirit, in His works *ad extra*, creates Adam and Eve, as rational, moral beings, they are His children and partake of His image, albeit in a creaturely way. Whereas the Son is eternally begotten, Adam is created in time. The Son is the *express* image of the Father; Adam is a creature of the dust, though magnificently adorned in moral rectitude and holiness. The Son's generation is necessary; Adam's is contingent, according to the sovereign pleasure of God. God, out of His own infinite sufficiency and fullness, freely willed to communicate His blessedness to the creature. God formed sons, not to have a family, but because He is the true Family — the Father and the Son in the Spirit — and that His own covenant life might be manifested in His people to the glory of His holy name.

Adam was God's covenant friend, loving, adoring and rejoicing in God. God communicated Himself to him and fellowshiped with him in love: Adam was a son of God.

However, Adam "being in honour ... understood it not, neither knew his excellency, but wilfully subjected himself to sin, and consequently to death and the curse, giving ear to the words of the devil."¹⁷ Adam lost the image of God and was no longer a son of God. Now he bore the image of the devil, "being wholly defiled in all parts and faculties of soul and body."¹⁸ Man became a child of the flesh ([Rom 9.8](#)), a child of darkness ([Eph 5.8](#)), a child of disobedience ([Eph 2.2](#)), a child of wrath ([Eph 2.3](#)), a child of hell ([Mat 23.15](#)) and a child of the devil ([1Joh 3.10](#)) with Satan as his father ([Joh 8.44](#)).¹⁹

Not only did Adam fall but, because he was constituted mankind's federal head, the whole human race fell in him ([Rom 5.12-21](#)). As God made Adam in His likeness, so Adam's children were begotten after the likeness of their fallen father in total depravity ([Gen 5.1-3](#)). Mankind plunged itself into sin and misery.

(2) *Are All Men Sons of God by Creation?*

The gross denial of original sin by the Pelagians and the old liberal theology — the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man — need not be discussed here. One Reformed debate, however, merits attention: Is there some sense in which the natural man is a child of God by creation? In the last century in Scotland, Thomas Crawford, Professor of Divinity at Edinburgh University answered affirmatively, while Robert Candlish, Principal of the Free

¹⁶ Cf. *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. & A. 4.

¹⁷ *Belgic Confession* 14.

¹⁸ *Westminster Confession* 6:2. For more on the *imago dei*, including the fact that unbelieving man is not the image of God but the image of the devil, check out this special webpage: "[Resources on the Image of God](#)," which contains audio interviews, lectures, doctrine classes and sermons, plus written articles and quotes.

¹⁹ "In fallen man," says Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "there is nothing left that can have the reality or bear the nature of son" ("Children of God; Sons of God," in Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al (eds.), *The International Student Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, rev. 1979], p. 648).

Church of Scotland's New College disavowed it.²⁰ The doughty John Kennedy of Dingwall weighed in with his fellow Free Churchman.²¹ Crawford's position is probably the majority opinion amongst Presbyterian and Reformed men, but, from what we have seen regarding "sonship" and "image," it must be rejected.

Some texts alleged as proof of a universal fatherhood of God by creation merit brief attention. Mal 2.10: "Have we not all one father? hath not one God created us?" might seem convincing. However, the "we," "all" and "us" do not refer to every individual in the world, but to all of Judah/Israel (vv. 8-9, 11). The prophet is rebuking God's chosen nation for "profaning the covenant of our father" (v. 10) and committing idolatry (v. 11). The text does speak of "father" and "create" (*bara*), but the latter is also used in a redemptive sense to speak of God's original act of calling Israel to Himself (cf. Isa 43.1). The text actually teaches God's particular, theocratic fatherhood of Judah.²²

Girardeau, in analyzing the Crawford-Candlish debate, reckons Luk 15.11-32, Acts 17.28-29 and Luk 3.38 are the clearest texts proving Crawford's position.²³ To appeal to the parable of the prodigal son (to give it its popular designation) is to clutch at straws. First, it is simply bad hermeneutics to appeal to a parable to establish a controverted doctrine. Second, the context tells us that Christ delivered the parable to vindicate His receiving the ungodly (Luk 15.1-2). The parable's teaching concerning God's fatherhood is that He loves His elect sons, who will, in the process of time, return to His loving embrace. There is nothing universalistic about sonship in this parable.

Paul's words to the philosophers on Mars Hill might seem to present a tougher case, but he only asserts that all men are God's offspring, not sons.²⁴ As we have seen, this is true, for the origin of all men is ultimately from God. He it was who created Adam as a son (Luk 3.38) but just because pre-fall Adam was God's son it does not follow that his post-fall children are God's sons. Adam fell as the root of all mankind (Acts 17.26) and produced children in his fallen image (Gen 5.3).

Fallen man is, of course, still a man, a moral and rational being, created and upheld by the omnipotent, transcendent, sovereign God (Acts 17.24, 26, 28). As a dependent moral being, man must worship something, but, being sinful, he wickedly subverts his knowledge of God and, by substituting false gods, seeks to bury the truth concerning Him (vv. 22-25, 27-31).

²⁰ Crawford, *Op. cit.*; Candlish, *Op. cit.* Interestingly, Crawford saw his position as aiding evangelism (pp. 62-67). For an analysis of the debate, see John Macleod, *Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh: The Publications Committee of the Free Church of Scotland, 1943), pp. 272-275.

²¹ John Kennedy, *Man's Relations to God* (Great Britain: The James Begg Society, repr. 1995).

²² John Murray, who argues for a universal creative fatherhood of God, admits that this text is useless for his position (*The Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2 [Great Britain: Banner, 1977], p. 224).

²³ Girardeau, *Op. cit.*, pp. 430, 472.

²⁴ Kennedy, *Op. cit.*, p. 19. "To use the word son of mere creaturehood is to give it a different sense from that which it has in NT usage" (Bromiley, "Children of God," p. 648).

Paul protests against this depravity and folly: “as we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver” (v. 29).²⁵

Jas 1.17, which tells us that God is the “Father of lights,” is another verse to which appeal is made. This divine title refers to God’s resplendent glory and effulgence, which James goes on to say is immutable and perfect: “with whom there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.” The God of light gives “every good and every perfect gift.” In the context, James is speaking of believers, so no universal love is here expressed. However, even if James was speaking of God’s good gifts to the reprobate, this would not indicate a favourable disposition toward them, still less that they were God’s sons.

To complete our brief examination of texts appealed to for some sort of universal fatherhood of God, we will consider Heb 12.9, which speaks of God as “the Father of spirits.” The context makes clear that this does not mean that God is the Father of all human spirits. Heb 12.5-11 speaks of God’s fatherly dealing with His sons. The fathers of our flesh corrected us and we submitted, argues the apostle, and so must we behave regarding the discipline of the Father of spirits (v. 9). So clear is it that God is not the Father of all men that those who are not chastened by God are described as “bastards and not sons” (v. 8).

To hold to a universal fatherhood of God through creation, it is necessary to misinterpret Scripture and ignore the biblical and Trinitarian unity between “image” and “sonship.” Serious theological problems then arise. An ungodly man is in the image of God by creation, even though God’s wrath lies upon him and he manifests the *imago diaboli* and is a son of Satan! When converted, he is then a child of God both by physical creation and adoption!²⁶ No wonder John Murray writes, “the concept of universal fatherhood, if used at all, must be employed with great caution.”²⁷ What sort of a doctrine is it that must be so treated?

As for Crawford’s position that preaching a universal fatherhood of God by creation aids evangelism, we must respectfully demur. God uses His own truth to call His wandering sheep. Nothing more is needed.

Sonship goes hand in hand with the image of God and involves an intimate fellowship with the Father in heaven. The antithesis must be maintained: neither believers, nor Christ, nor the Triune God has any fellowship with the children of Belial. Outside divine sonship there is nothing but sin and wrath.

Let us quote several authors from various countries and theological traditions on this point. Canadian Arthur Custance rightly stated, “God is the Father only of those who are His children by rebirth.”²⁸

²⁵ John Murray reluctantly, but correctly, states, “Nowhere is God expressly called the Father of all men” (*Collected Writings*, vol. 2, p. 224).

²⁶ Cf. Gordon H. Clark: “If a man becomes a child of God by adoption, he could not have been a child of God by nature” (*What do Presbyterians Believe?* [Philadelphia, PA: P & R, 1965], p. 132).

²⁷ Murray, *Collected Writings*, vol. 2, pp. 224-225.

²⁸ Arthur Custance, *Man in Adam and in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975), Part 3, chapter 1, p. 1 ([www.custance.org/Library/Volume3/Part III/chapter1.html](http://www.custance.org/Library/Volume3/Part_III/chapter1.html)).

English Baptist preacher, C. H. Spurgeon declared,

Believe the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God to his people. As I have warned you before, abhor the doctrine of the universal fatherhood of God, for it is a lie, and a deep deception. It stabs at the heart, first, of the doctrine of the adoption, which is taught in Scripture, for how can God adopt men if they are all his children already? In the second place, it stabs at the heart of the doctrine of regeneration, which is certainly taught in the Word of God. Now it is by regeneration and faith that we become the children of God, but how can that be if we are the children of God already? “As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” [[Joh 1.12-13](#)]. How can God give to men the power to become his sons if they have it already? Believe not that lie of the devil, but believe this truth of God, that Christ and all who are by living faith in Christ may rejoice in the Fatherhood of God.²⁹

Nineteenth-century Scottish Presbyterian theologian George Smeaton summed it up well:

The effectually called become ADOPTED SONS, and are translated by the power of the Spirit into the family of God. According to the canon, that whatever is imparted in the exercise of Christ’s grace implies the opposite in our state by nature, they who were born into God’s family were in the opposite family — in the family of Satan — before. It is the more necessary to set this in its proper light, because many do not hesitate to say, under the bias of a false system, that God is universal Father, and that all men are His children. They hold by what they call THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD in virtue of an alleged unbroken relation formed by creation, and assert that all men, without exception or distinction, belong to the family of God, much in the same way as Pope describes Him as Father of all in his universal prayer. Children, forsooth, who only disobey and dishonour their father! No: all men by nature belong to a family antagonistic to the family of God, and they do the lusts of a father who is described as a liar and murderer from the beginning. That position is in harmony with the doctrine of Christ and His apostles. Men cannot, at one and the same moment, be of their father the devil, as Cain was (1Joh 4.10-12), and as the Jews were, when our Lord announced to them their family (Joh 8.44), and yet be recognised or called the sons of God. The doctrine of our Lord and His apostles sets forth that sinners and all unregenerate men are children of the evil one.³⁰

In his classic book, *Knowing God*, Anglican J. I. Packer “emphatically” denies that unbelievers are God’s children:

The idea that all men are children of God is not found in the Bible anywhere. The Old Testament knows God as the Father, not of all men, but of His own people, the seed of Abraham. “Israel is my son, even my firstborn: and I say unto thee, Let my son go ...” ([Exodus 4.22f.](#)). The New Testament has a world vision, but it too shows God as the Father, not of all men, but of those who, knowing themselves to be sinners, put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as their divine sin-bearer and master, and so become Abraham’s spiritual seed. “Ye are all sons of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus ... ye all are one man in Christ Jesus. And if ye are Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed” ([Gal 3.26ff.](#)). Sonship to God is not, therefore, a universal status upon which everyone enters by natural birth, but a supernatural gift which one receives through receiving

²⁹ C. H. Spurgeon, “Our Lord’s Last Cry from the Cross,” a sermon delivered on Sunday evening 9 June, 1889, now listed as Sermon 2311 in Volume 39 of editions of his printed sermons.

³⁰ George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Great Britain: Banner, repr. 1958), p. 206.

Jesus. “No man cometh unto the Father” — in other words, is acknowledged by God as a son — “but by me” (Joh 14.6). The gift of sonship to God becomes ours, not through being born, but through being born again. “As many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name: which were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (Joh 1.12f.).³¹

(B) Israel — Adoptive Sonship

(1) Israel as God’s Son

Whereas Adam was God’s son through creation in God’s image, Israel was so only through God’s adoptive act.³² The apostle Paul places this adoption at the head of a lengthy list of privileges God gave to the Israelites (Rom 9.4-5).

Israel’s sonship was due to God’s sovereign choice (Deu 14.1-2) and not because of anything in him (Deu 7.7).³³ Though Israel was weak and despised (Eze. 16.1-15), God made bare His mighty arm and redeemed him (Deu 7.8; 32.5-6). God’s beloved firstborn son (Exo 4.22) was effectually called out of Egypt (Hos 11.1). God realized His covenant with Israel and gave him His moral law as a rule to guide him in thankful obedience, the Mosaic ordinances to train him in true worship and the gospel promises to fix his hope in the coming Messiah (Rom 9.4-5). The land of Canaan served the Israelites as an interim inheritance (Jer 3.19), typical of heaven (Heb 11.8-10, 13-16).

In all His dealings with Israel, God manifested His loving-kindness and goodness, through the Angel of His Presence (Isa 63.7-9). He it was who guided Israel in the wilderness and brought them into the promised land (Exo 23.20-23).

It was on the basis of his adoption that the Lord exhorted Israel to filial obedience (Deu 14.1). Jehovah’s firstborn son must serve Him (Exo 4.22-23). Since the Lord is the Father of the nation, the Israelites are brothers and must act accordingly (Mal 2.10).

Disobedience is particularly heinous because Israel is God’s son (Isa 1.2). As Israel’s Father, Jehovah is worthy of paternal honour (Mal 1.6). All too often in the Old Testament, God has occasion to refer to the Israelites as “sottish children” (Jer 4.22). Yet His love remains constant and His exhortations are especially tender: “Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings” (Jer 3.22). Often with His people, the Lord has to bring out the divine rod: “My son, despise not the chastening of the LORD; neither be weary of his correction” (Pro 3.11; cf. v. 12).

³¹ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, repr. 1992), p. 223. Similarly, John Phillips states, “Nobody can organize brotherhood. People can join lodges and clubs, they can found United Nations organizations and promote ecumenical movements all in vain. There can be no universal brotherhood of man apart from a universal fatherhood of God, and the Bible makes clear that God is not the father of all. He is the creator of all, but He is the father only of those who are born again, born from above, born of the Spirit of God. What the world is looking for is a practical demonstration of brotherhood and unity among the children of God” (*Exploring the Psalms: Psalms 89-150* [Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, Inc., 1988], p. 538).

³² Regarding God’s adoption of Israel, Calvin points out that efficacious grace was only bestowed on the elect within the nation (*Institutes* 3.22.6).

³³ God’s election and adoption of Old Testament Israel was particular and discriminating. “In Judah is God known: his name is great in Israel” (Psa 76.1). “He hath not dealt so with any [other] nation” (Psa 147.20).

(2) *The Adoption of Israel and New Testament Adoption*

In God's dealings with Old Testament Israel, we see a divine pattern for His dealings with His New Covenant sons, yet there are obvious and important dissimilarities.³⁴ In general, these partake of the differences between the Old and New Dispensations. The Old is anticipation; the New is realization. The Old is the realm of shadows and types; the New of fulfilment. Through the death and resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, we now have God's covenant blessings in a fuller, richer and deeper way than in the Old Testament.

Most obviously, God's adopting grace is now known amongst the nations. The church has been freed from the swaddling bands of Jewish nationalism. Hosea prophesied, "It shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God" (Hos 1.10).³⁵

Not only has God's adoption "widened" to include the Gentiles but it has also become more individualized. Whereas Adam and Eve were created God's son and daughter, Israel was adopted as a *nation*. It is the nation of Israel that pleads with God, "Doubtless thou art our father, though Abraham be ignorant of us" (Isa 63.16). God asks Israel, "Wilt thou not from this time cry unto me, My father, thou art the guide of my youth?" (Jer 3.4).

Now in the "last days," the *believer* cries, "Abba, Father" (Rom 8.15; Gal 4.6). It is true that, since God is the father of Israel and that the nation is made up of individuals, He is the father of each and every believer in Israel, but the Old Testament never explicitly states this.³⁶

Isa 43.6: "Bring my sons from afar, and my daughters from the ends of the earth," goes some way towards this, in mentioning *women*.³⁷ Deu 8.5 and especially Pro 3.11-12 come very close to individual sonship, but the son is "loved" and "corrected" "as a man chastens his son." Similarly, the Lord "pities" (Psa 103.13) and "spares" (Mal 3.7) the godly Israelite, as a father his son.³⁸

In none of the Psalms, for example, do we read a prayer addressed to God as Father.³⁹ Even when Christ quoted Psalm 31 in His last word from the cross, "Father into thy hands I commend my spirit" (Luk 23.46), we realize that "Father" is not included in Psalm 31.5.

³⁴ James M. Scott shows that New Testament adoption is to be viewed against an Old Testament, rather than a Greco-Roman, background ("Adoption, Sonship," in Gerald F. Hawthorne et al (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993], pp. 16-18).

³⁵ Hosea 1.10 is quoted in Rom 9.26 (cf. Hos 2.23; Rom 9.25).

³⁶ Cf. Edwin H. Palmer: "The emphasis is upon Israel as the son, and not upon the separate individuals as children" (*Scheeben's Doctrine of Divine Adoption* [Kampen: J. H. Kok, n.d.], p. 174).

³⁷ Gal 3.28 is the classic New Testament text in this regard.

³⁸ The very nearness of these texts to proving that "the relationship of personal sonship to the Father was revealed as the privilege of the saints individually," as Candlish observes, "makes the stopping short of it all the more noticeable" (*Op. cit.*, p. 77).

³⁹ Psalm 89.26, which might, at first, seem to be an exception, is put in the mouth of the Messiah. The Davidic king (as a type of Christ) is referred to as God's "son" (2Sam 7.14; Psa 2.7). The Messiah is also typified as "son" in the Old Testament civil judges (Psa 82.6). Furthermore, the righteous angels, being in the image of God, are called God's sons (Job 1.6; 2.1; 38.7). It is fallacious to reason that since Satan came with the "sons of God," he is also a son of God (Job 1.6).

Gal 4.1-10 makes an additional point regarding the fullness of New Testament adoption. Whereas the Israelites were placed under the outward, external discipline of the law, New Testament believers have a greater liberty in the Spirit. The apostle, viewing the old dispensation in the light of the new, even compares it to servitude (v. 7). Israel, Paul explains, is like a rich man's child, who is tutored by governors until the time appointed by his father, when he enters his dignity as heir and rules as master (vv. 1-2, 7). Now, through the incarnation and death of Christ (vv. 4-5), the church has matured and the Spirit of the Son is sent forth into our hearts (v. 6).

The outpouring of the Spirit and the intercession of the Son also result in a greater liberty of access to the Father. All around the world, multitudes of God's people are crying out, "Abba, Father" (v. 4). Consider Paul's prayers in Ephesians, for example. They are all addressed to God *as Father* and breathe an intense *filial* spirit.⁴⁰

(3) *The Trinitarian Perspective*

Here again we need to consider the Trinitarian perspective. Why exactly is it that, through the coming of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit, New Testament adoption is fuller and freer?

First, there is the matter of *revelation* and the church's subjective appropriation of it. Through the incarnation and Pentecost, God made clear to His church that He is Triune — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This doctrine is also, more dimly, taught in the Old Testament, but it took the "concrete" historical manifestations of the Second and Third Persons, for the mind of the church to attain a firm grip on it. Also it is only through Christ's incarnation and the Spirit's outpouring, that we can grasp the *ad intra* Trinitarian relationships: the Father's eternal generation of the Son and the Holy Spirit's eternal procession from the Father through the Son.⁴¹

Second, there is the matter of *theology* proper. Viewing God merely monotheistically, it is not at all clear how He can be Father. His fatherhood seems rather to be "tacked on" to His Deity. When, however, the one Being of God is properly understood as consisting in three Persons — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — everything falls into place. In that the Father is the First Person of the Trinity, it is clear that God is eternally and essentially Father *in Himself*. He would still be the perfect and all sufficient Father had He never willed to adopt a church, for within the Godhead the Father is eternally begetting the Son.

Third, there is the matter of *Christology*. As the "only begotten Son," dwelling "in the bosom of the Father," Christ perfectly "expounded" or "exegeted" the Father (Joh 1.18).⁴² Jesus summed up His divine mission: "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (Joh 14.9; cf. 12.45). Christ, to use Luther's words, is the "mirror of the fatherly heart of God."⁴³ Nowhere

⁴⁰ Eph 1.2, 17; 2.18-19; 3.14-15; 6.23.

⁴¹ The outgoing works of the Triune God, as Christian theology has confessed, are true revelations of His own inter-Trinitarian relationships.

⁴² "The Son's exegesis is good exegesis. It is both true and thorough" (David J. Engelsma, *Trinity and Covenant: God as Holy Family* [Jenison, MI: RFP, 2006], p. 20).

⁴³ Quoted in J. Gottschick, "Adoption," in Samuel Macauley Jackson et al (eds.), *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, vol. 1 (New York and London: Funk Wagnalis Company, 1908), p. 47.

in Christ's ministry is this more clearly seen than in His death on the cross. Not only does Christ, as the Word of God, reveal the Father but also, through the Father-Son relationship revealed in the Scriptures, we see the love of the Father for His only begotten Son.

J. I. Packer has done some fine work here, in summarizing Christ's teaching on this in John's Gospel.⁴⁴ God's fatherly relation to Christ implies first of all *authority*. "I came down from heaven," Christ said, "not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me" (Joh 6.38).⁴⁵ Second, fatherhood implies *honour*: "Father, glorify thy Son" (Joh 17.1).⁴⁶ Third, fatherhood implies *affection*: "The Father loveth the Son" (Joh 5.20).⁴⁷ Fourth, fatherhood implies *fellowship*: "I am not alone, because the Father is with me" (Joh 16.32).⁴⁸

As those adopted in Christ (Eph 1.5), Christ's Father is our Father (Joh 20.17). We too are under God's fatherly rule and receive the abundant privileges of those beloved of God. Most glorious of all is our intimate covenant communion with the Father and the Son in the Spirit.⁴⁹

Fourth, there is the matter of *pneumatology*. Through His redemptive death on the cross, Christ obtained our blessed salvation and rich gifts for His church (Eph 4.8). In the New Testament era, as the dispensation of fulfilment and fullness, these gifts are lavished in greater abundance. In the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit is the gift of love from the Father to the Son and from the Son to the Father.⁵⁰ Here, as always, God's *ad extra* work of redemption truly reveals His inter-Trinitarian life — the gift that Christ merited for His sons is the Holy Spirit, the eternal gift.

The Holy Spirit immediately seals our sonship upon our hearts by manifesting Christ to us. Christ, in turn, is the Son, Image and Word of the Father. The Spirit thus reveals the Son and the Father, and we know ourselves as sons and God as our Father, for Jesus sake.

(III) Adoption and the *Ordo Salutis*

So far we have considered the glorious dignity of the sons of God — covenant fellowship with our heavenly Father, the Triune God. Now we need to turn to consider the legal act of adoption by which God reckons us as His children. To sharpen our conception of adoption and clear away false theories, we will consider the relationships between adoption and several other steps in the order of salvation (*ordo salutis*).

⁴⁴ Packer, *Op. cit.*, pp. 228-229.

⁴⁵ Cf. Joh 4.34; 5.19; 8.28; 12.49-50; 14.31; 17.4.

⁴⁶ Cf. Joh 5.19f., 36f.; 17.5.

⁴⁷ Cf. Joh 10.17; 15.9f.; 17.23-26.

⁴⁸ Cf. Joh 8.29; 10.15; 17.5, 21-26.

⁴⁹ Cf. Joh 17.26: "I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it: that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them."

⁵⁰ Engelsma, *Op. cit.*, p. 79.

(A) Adoption and Justification

Some eminent theologians, including Francis Turretin and Charles Hodge, have viewed adoption as a “part” of justification.⁵¹ Both are legal acts; both are single acts of all three Trinitarian Persons. Our adoption reflects the divine economy in our justification: the Father predestinates us to adoption, the Son by His atonement has procured its accomplishment and the Holy Spirit applies it in due time.⁵² Both — and this seems to be the clincher for many — invest the elect regenerated sinner with a legal right to the divine inheritance.

The Bible gives a more lengthy treatment to justification than to the act of adoption.⁵³ The Greek word for adoption (*huiiothesia*), in fact, occurs only five times in the New Testament, all of which are in Paul’s letters.⁵⁴ If we add to this the historical significance of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, it is not surprising that many have subsumed adoption under justification.

Though not surprising, it is not correct. First, though both justification and adoption provide a right to inheritance, it does not follow that one must be an aspect of the other. In justification, Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us, whereas, in adoption, we are reckoned as God’s sons. God, in His grace, can reward us not only as sons but as righteous. For example, in Rom 5.17, 18 and 21, justification gives us a title to eternal life. The contrast is between the complex of sin-death-condemnation and that of righteousness-life-justification. The fatherhood of God or our sonship is not in view.

Second, that justification and adoption are both legal acts is also inconclusive. Regeneration and calling are both organic acts, and Reformed theology has recognized them as distinct carrying their own particular ideas.⁵⁵ Though both are forensic acts, the sphere of justification is the criminal court; of adoption, the family court. Justification brings us into the number of the righteous; adoption ushers us into the family of God. In justification, the elect sinner is viewed as an innocent subject; in adoption, as a son. In justification, God is judge; in adoption, God is Father. Justification is rooted in an attribute of God, His righteousness; adoption is rooted in the personal distinctions in the Holy Trinity. The comfort of justification is acquittal and imputed righteousness; in adoption, it is fellowship with the Father.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 2 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1994), pp. 666-669; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, repr. 1986), pp. 128-129, 164.

⁵² Cf. Ames, *Op. cit.*, p. 164.

⁵³ However, the Bible has a lot to say on the resultant *life* of the adopted.

⁵⁴ Rom 8.15, 23; 9.4; Gal 4.5; Eph 1.5. Only in one of these texts does *huiiothesia* apply to the nation of Israel in Old Testament days (Rom 9.4; cf., e.g., Exo 4.22-23); the other four verses speak of the adoption of individuals in the New Testament era. *Huiiothesia* comes from two Greek words *huios* (“son”) and *tithemi* (“place” or “appoint”), and means, literally, the “placing as sons.”

⁵⁵ Interestingly, the *Westminster Confession*, which does such a fine job in distinguishing between justification (chapter 11) and adoption (chapter 12) as two separate elements in the *ordo salutis*, fails to distinguish between regeneration and calling (chapter 10).

⁵⁶ Cf. T. Rees: “Justification is the act of a merciful judge setting the prisoner free, but adoption is the act of a generous father, taking a son to his bosom and endowing him with liberty, favor, and a heritage” (“Adoption; Sonship,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al (eds.), *The International Student Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 1 [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans,

Here, Louis Berkhof's scheme breaks down. In his presentation of adoption as a part of justification, he speaks of the latter as consisting of "two elements:" a negative and a positive element. The negative element, he says, is the forgiveness of sins, and the positive element has two components: "the adoption of children" and "the right to eternal life."⁵⁷

Through his failure to distinguish between justification and adoption, Berkhof's analysis of both suffers. First, he never gets round to explicitly stating the positive element in justification — the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.⁵⁸ Second, he does not express the negative aspect of adoption — our removal from the dominion of the devil's "fatherhood."⁵⁹ To state the matter fully: in justification, our sins are forgiven and we are righteous in Christ; in adoption, we no longer have Satan but the Triune God for our Father. This must be made clear.⁶⁰

(B) Adoption and Regeneration

Whereas Charles Hodge followed Turretin in his analysis of adoption rather than the *Westminster Standards*, his son A. A. Hodge plotted a different path, neither that of his father or of his confession.⁶¹ For Archibald Hodge, adoption is a combination of both justification (a legal blessing) and regeneration (an organic blessing).⁶² While Charles Hodge saw adoption as a part of justification, A. A. Hodge saw justification as a part of adoption. Since, as we have seen, justification and adoption are distinct, though related, acts of God, neither presentation is acceptable.

Though both are divine *acts*, regeneration is organic and determines our nature, whereas adoption is legal and determines our status. In regeneration, God deals with a spiritually dead sinner; in adoption, with a child of the devil.⁶³ Regeneration is creative — God gives us life; adoption is declarative — He gives us the names of sons.

God gives us life in regeneration and out of this seed we believe. Faith is logically prior to justification (Rom 5.1) and also to adoption (Gal 3.26). Galatians chapters 3-4 and Romans

rev. 1979], p. 54). We must heartily disagree with Turretin, who holds that "to no purpose do some anxiously ask ... how justification and adoption differ from each other" (*Op. cit.*, p. 668).

⁵⁷ Louis Berkhof, "D. The Elements of Justification," in *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, rev. 1996), pp. 514-516.

⁵⁸ In this section, he says that there is more to justification than remission of sins; that justification has a positive element; and that the latter more particularly concerns Christ's "active obedience." My point is not that Berkhof departs from the orthodox faith here (he does clearly teach the imputation of Christ's righteousness elsewhere in the chapter) but merely that his compounding justification and adoption is to the detriment of his presentation of both.

⁵⁹ The fatherhood of Satan does not carry the idea of love, but, as we have said, like all fatherhood it carries the idea of *image*: here, of hate. In the family of Satan, everyone is "hateful and hating one another" (cf. Titus 3.3). They only unite in opposition to God, and for selfish purposes.

⁶⁰ The *Westminster Standards* do not actually point out the negative aspect of adoption.

⁶¹ Archibald A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1878), pp. 515-519; *A Commentary on the Confession of Faith* (London and Worcester: Banner, repr. 1958), pp. 191-193.

⁶² Adoption, says A. A. Hodge, "embraces in one complex view the newly-regenerated creature in the new relations into which he is introduced by justification" (*ibid.*, p. 192).

⁶³ To complete the listing of God's four initiatory saving acts, we might add that in *calling* Jehovah effectually calls elect sinners to be what they are not in themselves (Rom 4.17; 9.26; 1Cor 1.28; 1Pet. 2.9-10), and in *justification* He deals with the unrighteous and guilty.

chapters 1-8 treat adoption after justification, but in itself this is not conclusive. However, since it is incongruous to think of God adopting children whom He has not reckoned as righteous in Christ, we must see adoption as following justification in the *ordo salutis*. In justification, we are accepted as righteous; in adoption, God heaps grace upon grace by going a step further and making us sons.

We thus arrive at the following order: regeneration — (faith) — justification — adoption. Not only are justification and adoption distinct acts, so too are regeneration and adoption. Regeneration produces faith and faith precedes adoption.

(C) Adoption and Sanctification

Whereas regeneration, justification and adoption are distinct divine acts occurring only once, sanctification is a progressive divine work. The question arises: What is adoption's relation to sanctification? Is adoption also progressive?

So far we have seen the negative and positive elements of God's legal adoptive act. We now need to consider the work of the Spirit with respect to our adoption. After speaking of our adoption ([Gal 4.5](#)), the apostle states, "And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father" (v. 6).

Three points must be noted from this text. *First*, the relationship between the adoptive act and God's sending His Spirit into our hearts is causal.⁶⁴ God sends forth His Holy Spirit *because* we are sons. *Second*, the Spirit is entitled "the Spirit of his Son."⁶⁵ *Third*, the work of the Spirit in our hearts is to bear testimony to our sonship.

[Gal 4.6](#) teaches us that *the Spirit* in us cries, "Abba, Father," whereas [Rom 8.15](#) states that, by the Spirit of adoption, "*we* cry, Abba, Father."⁶⁶ There is no contradiction here. Galatians 4 fixes the spotlight on the Spirit's testimony in us, while Romans 8 focuses on the result His inner testimony in our hearts: we receive a joyful consciousness of our sonship and are emboldened to freely call upon God as our heavenly Father.⁶⁷

While Scripture clearly speaks of the work of the Spirit in testifying of our sonship, it does not ascribe sanctification, that progressive work of conforming us to the image of the Son, to the Spirit of adoption. Here we must respectfully disagree with Calvin. "Whomsoever ... God

⁶⁴ The *hoti* of [Gal 4.6](#) is to be understood as causal ("because") rather than demonstrative ("that") (cf. Palmer, *Op. cit.*, pp. 192-193).

⁶⁵ In the thought of the apostle in Galatians 4, we can only be sons (vv. 5-7) because God is the true Father (v. 7), our redeemer is His Son (vv. 4, 6) and the Spirit is the Spirit of the Son (v. 6). Our adoption to sons of God is only because God the Son (in a human nature) died for us. Similarly, Augustine wrote: "He alone became the Son of God and the Son of man, that he might make us to be with himself sons of God" (quoted in Calvin, *Institutes* 3.5.3).

⁶⁶ "Abba" is Aramaic and its meaning is somewhere between "daddy" and "father." John Murray notes, "The repetition [i.e., "Abba, Father"] indicates the warmth as well as the confidence with which the Holy Spirit emboldens the people of God to draw nigh as children to a father able and ready to help them" (*The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, NICOT [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959], p. 296).

⁶⁷ Again John Murray's remarks are felicitous: "The hesitation to entertain this confidence of approach to God the Father is not a mark of true humility. It is to be noted that it is by or in the Holy Spirit that this approach is made. Without this filial reverence and tenderness fostered by the Spirit the address is presumption and arrogance" (*ibid.*, p. 296).

receives into his favour,” writes the Genevan Reformer, “he presents with *the Spirit of adoption, whose agency forms them anew into his image.*”⁶⁸ While sanctification is indeed the work of the Spirit, it is not His work as the Spirit of adoption.

Like justification, adoption changes one’s status. One is either guilty or innocent/righteous (by justification); a child of the devil or a child of God (by adoption). One’s legal standing does not permit of increase (or decrease); one cannot become “more” innocent or “more” a child of God. The work of the Spirit with regard to our justification is to witness to it in our hearts; the work of the Spirit of adoption is to testify to our sonship.⁶⁹

Adoption does, however, have implications for our sanctification. The eternal Son, who came to show us the Father (Joh 14.9), perfectly manifested the filial spirit. He ever lived in the consciousness of His sonship, and *thus* He loved, honoured and glorified the Father. “Now, just as the knowledge of His unique sonship controlled Jesus’ living of His own life on earth,” writes Packer, “so He insists that the knowledge of our adoptive sonship control our lives too.”⁷⁰

Through our adoption, the same Spirit, who fully dwelt in Christ, dwells in our hearts. Christ, in His intimate communion with the Father, called Him, “Abba” (Mark 14.36), and now the Spirit He gives us evokes our cry, “Abba, Father” (Rom 8.15; Gal 4.6). Believers, as James Scott enthuses, “participate in the sonship of the messianic Son of God to such an extent that they address God with the *ipsissima verba* of the Son.”⁷¹

This wonderful work of the Spirit in taking the things of Christ and applying them to us (cf. Joh 16.13-15) is entirely consistent with His eternal procession from the Father through the Son. As the bond of fellowship between the Father and the Son, He effects our union and communion with God. He assures us that we are God’s children (Rom 8.16) and the objects of His unfailing love. In the Spirit, we talk to the majestic Creator of heaven and earth as our sovereign Father and friend (Rom 8.15, 26-27; Joh 15.14-15). Through Him, God’s covenant is effected in His elect.

(D) Adoption and Glorification

The sonship of the child of God is fully realized in glorification. In Galatians 4, the contrast is between the adoption of Israel and New Testament adoption or, if you will, between the past and present. In Romans 8, it is between the present and the future, the “already” of our adoption in this life and the “not yet” of the adoption of our bodies in the world to come.⁷²

The same Spirit who makes us cry out to our Father (Gal 4.6; Rom 8.15) groans within us “for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of the body” (Rom 8.23; cf. v. 11).⁷³ The eschatological

⁶⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* 3.11.6.

⁶⁹ Of course, this is not to deny that justification and adoption are inseparably linked to sanctification. The justified child of God will (inescapably) know the purifying work of the Holy Spirit in his life. Sanctification evinces not only our justification but also our adoption (Calvin, *Institutes* 3.6.2).

⁷⁰ Packer, *Op. cit.*, p. 235.

⁷¹ James M. Scott, *Adoption as Sons of God* (Germany: J. C. B. Mohr, 1992), pp. 182-183.

⁷² Cf. Rom 8.15-16, 23.

⁷³ To summarize some of the key distinctions we have seen regarding individual New Testament adoption:

perfection of our bodies is part of the content of our Christian hope. This future adoption is the object of our longing and for it we patiently wait (Rom 8.25). We have company in our groaning: the creation that was unwillingly subjected to vanity longs for its liberation (vv. 20-21).

On the great day of the resurrection, there will be a new heaven and a new earth, and all Christ's enemies will be put under His feet (1Cor 15.25). The sons of God shall be clothed with glory (Rom 8.17-21). In Christ's supreme vindication, they too will be honoured and that before the ungodly world, which spurned their sonship and persecuted them (1Joh 3.1-2; Rom 8.17). Christ will be the "firstborn" (Col 1.15; Rev. 3.14) among His many brethren (Rom 8.29; Heb 2.11). All things will be summed up in Christ (Eph 1.10) and "the whole family in heaven and earth" (Eph 3.15) will be perfectly united.

It is no wonder that the sons of God groan for their inheritance in Christ (Rom 8.17; Gal 4.7). Only then will Jehovah's adopted children be completely righteous in both body and soul, like pre-fall Adam but even more blessed in Christ; and restored to full communion in the true paradise.⁷⁴ Thankfully, there can be no defecting from this sonship. God's promise will be fulfilled through all eternity: "He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son" (Rev. 21.7).

(E) Adoption and Union With Christ

The groaning of the believer for the perfection of his adoption must be understood *theologically*. Our groaning is the product of the "firstfruits of the Spirit" (Rom 8.23). He is the bond between the Father and the Son, and He works in us the love of God (cf. Rom 5.5). In and through us, the Spirit breathes forth the Son's love to the Father and the Father's love to the Son. This holy love in us yearns for perfect fruition — union with God in the eternal state. Our union with God is, of course, different from that essential and eternal unity in the Holy Trinity. Even in glory, man is still a creature; lighter than vanity, in comparison with the Most High God. The child of God will always remain distinct from God, as a separate being. Nevertheless, the elect son is in an organic, vital, personal and joyous union with the Triune God, through the Son and in the Spirit.⁷⁵

Adoption is rooted in the Triune life of God and issues in our experiential union with Him in Christ.⁷⁶ Eternally the Father decreed to adopt us in Christ to Himself.⁷⁷ Like the Son's eternal

(1) Adoption consists of *negative* and *positive* aspects (translation from the fatherhood of Satan to that of God).

(2) Adoption is a *legal act* that changes *our state* before God and it is sealed in the consciousness of the believer by the witness of the Spirit.

(3) Our adoption is both a *present reality* (Rom 8.15-16) and a *future hope* (v. 23).

⁷⁴ "Then," says Rees, "will adoption be complete, when man's whole personality shall be in harmony with the spirit of sonship" ("Adoption; Sonship," p. 18).

⁷⁵ John Murray writes, "We cannot think of adoption apart from union with Christ" (*Redemption — Accomplished and Applied* [Great Britain: Banner, repr. 1979], p. 170).

⁷⁶ Perhaps this is another application of Gregory of Nazianzus' famous line: "I cannot think on the one without being encircled by the splendour of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straightway carried back to the one."

⁷⁷ For a discussion of *eternal* adoption, see John Gill, *A Body of Divinity* (Atlanta, GA: Turner Lassetter, repr. 1950), pp. 201-203.

generation, our adoption is “in love” (Eph 1.4-5). Like all spiritual blessings in Ephesians 1, adoption is *in Christ* and *according to election* (vv. 3-6). Thus to be adopted, or to have any spiritual blessing, is to have all spiritual blessings eternally in Christ.

Redemption is *in Christ* (Eph 1.7) and is, therefore, particular. It is not for the reprobate, who will forever carry the *imago diaboli*. In due time, the Spirit unites us to Christ. From the bond of faith, proceeds the activity of faith, which results in our appropriation of our adoption (Gal 3.26). Because we are adopted, God sends forth into our hearts the Spirit of His Son (Gal 4.6), who testifies to us of our new status as God’s children and realizes in us the joy of our union with Christ and, hence, with the Triune God.⁷⁸

Jonathan Edwards, in the conclusion of his sermon, “The Excellency of Christ,” expressed it beautifully:

Christ has brought it to pass, that those whom the Father has given him shall be brought into the household of God; that he and his Father, and his people, should be as one society, one family; that the church should be as it were admitted into the society of the blessed Trinity.⁷⁹

(IV) Conclusion

The *Westminster Standards* provide the clearest creedal presentation of the biblical doctrine of adoption. The Westminster divines correctly present adoption as distinct from both regeneration/calling and justification. As a Reformed confession, it roots adoption in God’s sovereign predestination.⁸⁰ For all this it is to be commended. It does not, however, root adoption in the inter-Trinitarian life of the Godhead.⁸¹

It has mostly been the Presbyterians, following the lead of their confession, who have sought to develop and promote the doctrine of adoption. In Scottish Presbyterianism, however, neither Crawford nor Candlish are satisfactory in all respects. The former saw all (by creation) as sons of God, while the latter denied the dignity of sonship to pre-fall Adam. In the writings of the Southern Presbyterians a greater clarity and abler presentation are to be found. However, it must be questioned if John Henry Thornwell’s moral government approach was as key an insight as they seemed to think.⁸² The servant-son distinction they applied to the doctrine does indeed have its uses and provides insights, but alone it does not yield the desired results.

⁷⁸ Cf. John Murray: “Union with Christ reaches its zenith in adoption and adoption has its orbit in union with Christ” (*Redemption*, p. 170).

⁷⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Edward Hickman, vol. 1 (Great Britain: Banner, repr. 1974), p. 689. Cf. John H. Gerstner, *The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 3 (Powhatan, VA: Berea Publications, 1993), pp. 221-223.

⁸⁰ *Westminster Confession* 3:6; 12:1; cf. 11:1; 10:1. See also the *Irish Articles of Religion* (1615), Article 15, in Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877), p. 529.

⁸¹ This is not surprising in the light of the brief treatment this doctrine receives in the *Westminster Confession* (2:3).

⁸² Morton H. Smith writes of the role this occupied in the thinking of Girardeau and Webb (*Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 [USA: Greenville Seminary Press, 1994], p. 465; *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1962], pp. 265-266).

Both the Scottish and the American Presbyterian theologians could have done more with adoption by seeking more fully to view it from a Trinitarian perspective. It is the “bond” between the Holy Trinity and adoption that provides the key for understanding the latter and enables us to view adoption in a truly Reformed and covenantal framework. The union between “sonship” and “image” is central to denying sonship to the reprobate *in any sense*. The inter-Trinitarian relationships, which are reflected in God’s outgoing redemptive acts, help us to understand the reason for the differences in the adoption of Israel and that of New Testament believers. Most importantly, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity reveals God’s covenant fellowship that is at the heart of our sonship.

Thus, while many have been confusing adoption with justification or regeneration or both, it is adoption’s relationship to union with Christ that deserves more treatment. In this, however, we must be careful to avoid mysticism, by anchoring God’s legal act of adoption in the cross.

As to the value of the doctrine of adoption for Christ’s church, several general conclusions force themselves upon us.

First, adoption, as we have seen, is a *broad* doctrine, touching on all the six traditional *loci* of dogmatics: theology (the Trinity, predestination), anthropology (man in the image of God, the fall), Christology (the covenant, the atonement), soteriology (the Spirit of Christ, union with Christ, regeneration, justification, sanctification), ecclesiology (the church invisible, the communion of the saints) and eschatology (the resurrection, the new creation).

Second, adoption is very clearly a *gracious* doctrine. Roman Catholicism teaches an adoption based on an infused grace (*gratia infusa*); the Bible teaches that adoption is a sovereign legal act of the Father, grounded in the atonement of the Son. Arminianism teaches that the child of God can be lost; the biblical doctrine of a loving and powerful heavenly Father denies that He can ever forsake or disinherit us.⁸³ The false doctrine of common grace teaches that all men bear the image of God; adoption shows us that “image” and “sonship” are coterminous.

Third, adoption is a *practical* doctrine. Adoption gives us a rich perspective on the Christian life, as covenant fellowship with the Triune God. It presents sanctification from the viewpoint of our sonship. In opposition to the Pharisaism of Romanism and our sinful natures, adoption teaches us that our obedience to God’s law must not be for the purpose of meriting but of pleasing our heavenly Father. “Adoption,” as Packer points out, “appears in the Sermon [on the Mount] as the basis of *Christian conduct*.”⁸⁴ The fatherhood of God undergirds the whole sermon and hence must be central in Christian ethics.

Our sonship is at the heart of prayer, as we have seen. Adoption has a direct bearing on assurance.⁸⁵ With biblical warrant, the Reformed have traditionally considered Christian

⁸³ Cf. *Canons of Dordt* V:6. Calvin speaks of the Holy Spirit as “the earnest penny [i.e., penny] of our adoption” (*Sermons on the Epistles to Timothy and Titus* [Oxford: Banner, repr. 1983], p. 927). Elsewhere, he declares that our adoption is “sure and steadfast” (*Institutes* 3.2.11).

⁸⁴ Packer, *Op. cit.*, p. 235; italics Packer’s.

⁸⁵ *Rom 8.16*; *Canons of Dordt* V:10; *Westminster Confession* 18:2. For more on the relationship between adoption and assurance, see David J. Engelsma, “*The Gift of Assurance*” (Evangelism Committee of the South Holland Protestant Reformed Church, 2009), pp. 30-33.

liberty in the light of our sonship.⁸⁶ Divine correction must be understood in the light of it.⁸⁷ As God's children, we experience the loving chastening of our Father and not retributive punishment as the ungodly. Indeed, there are a wealth of applications which may be brought out.

Fourth, adoption is a *comforting* doctrine. Christ has promised that He will never leave us as orphans (Joh 14.18; Greek). God is our Father who works all things for our good.⁸⁸ Does the atonement of our Saviour show us the great love of God (Rom 5.8; 1Joh 4.8-10)? Here is another doctrine that reveals that love from another perspective (Eph 1.4-5). Adoption brings us into fellowship with the glorious Triune God who is our Father for Jesus' sake. Here is joy and bliss (1Joh 1.3-4). As Petrus van Mastricht declares,

... the end or fruit of this faith or reception, namely, union and communion with Christ, is contained in that one word "adoption," since by the reception of Christ we who have been made his brothers and rendered heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. And in this consists every bit of our blessedness.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Cf. Heppe, *Op. cit.*, p. 553; *Westminster Confession* 20:1; Turretin, *Op. cit.*, p. 669.

⁸⁷ Pro 3.11-12; Heb 12.5-11.

⁸⁸ Cf. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. & A. 27-28.

⁸⁹ Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, Volume 2: *Faith in the Triune God*, trans. Todd M. Rester, ed. Joel Beeke (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), p. 6.