

The Baptist Confession of Faith (26): Of Adoption

Paragraph 12 describes the nature and benefits of adoption. Though neglected by some, others place a premium on adoption. "Justification is the basic blessing, on which adoption is founded; adoption is the crowning blessing, to which justification clears the way" (Packer).¹

This blessing of grace rises higher than justification. Though a judge may fully acquit one who is arraigned before him on a charge of crime, he does not confer, on the man so acquitted, any of the privileges or advantages which belong to a son. But the believer in Jesus is permitted to regard God, not only as a justifying Judge, but as a reconciled and affectionate Father.²

I. Of Adoption

1. *The nature of adoption.* "All those that are justified, God vouchsafed, in and for the sake of his only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption." Adoption is a legal declaration that results in practical benefits. "Adoption is, like justification, a judicial act" (Murray).³ "Adoption is that judicial act of God by which He confers or bestows upon us the status or the standing of children" (MLJ).⁴ "Adoption is a change in legal status from that of slave to that of son of God" (Waldron).⁵ "As many as received Him, to them He gave the right (authority) to become children of God" (Jn.1:12). "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Gal.3:26).

Adoption, according to the scriptural sense of the term, is an act of God, by which He pronounces sinful men to be His sons, admits them into His family, and gives them a right to the privileges of His children.⁶

Adoption is the authoritative translation of a believer, by Jesus Christ, from the family of the world and Satan into the family of God, with his possession in all the privileges and advantages of that family.⁷

Adoption is the gracious judgment of God wherein He gives the faithful the dignity of sonship because of Christ.⁸

Thus, adoption is closely related to justification. Justification logically precedes adoption and is its foundation. "By adoption, sons of Satan, are, in consequence of the imputation of Jesus' righteousness to them for their justification, admitted members of His family" (Brown).⁹ And so, adoption must be distinguished from justification. "Justification is a *forensic* idea, conceived in terms of *law*, viewing God as *judge*. Adoption is a *family* idea, conceived in terms of *love*, and viewing God as *father*" (Packer).¹⁰

In adoption, God takes us into His family and fellowship, and establishes us as His children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the

¹ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, 167-168

² John Dagg, *Manual of Theology and Church Order*, 1:274-275

³ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 133

⁴ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible*, 3:179

⁵ Sam Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith*, 200

⁶ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 3:406

⁷ John Owen, *Works*, 2:207

⁸ William Ames, *Marrow of Theology*, 164

⁹ John Brown, *Systematic Theology*, 393

¹⁰ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 187

relationship. To be right with God the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the father is a greater.¹¹

2. *The benefits of adoption.* Though adoption is fundamentally legal it results in practical benefits. Our Confession divides these benefits into liberties and privileges: "and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God." (1) Liberties. As children, we are liberated from the law as a broken covenant, sin as a master, and Satan as a father. "Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ" (Gal.4:7). "In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is he who does not love his brother" (1Jn.3:10). "The son must still serve the Father and obey His laws, but he does it out of love and no longer has need to do that in order to earn something. Under the curse of the law they were slaves; now they are sons (Gal.4:7)" (Vos).¹²

(2) Privileges. "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" (SC).¹³ Our Confession provides 10 privileges (we will condense them into 7). (a) God's name is put on them. "Your people are called by Your name" (Dan.9:19). "With the Lamb was one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads" (Rev.14:1). To bear God's name entails two things: first, great dignity. "They are no more called children of the devil, but the sons and daughters of God" (Boston).¹⁴ "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God" (1Jn.3:1). Second, shared character. As "name" often denotes character (Ex.34:5-7), to be "called by the name of the LORD," is to possess God's character as sons. "For this reason, I bow my knees before the Father, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth derives its name" (Eph.3:14-15). "A father generates a son according to his image; a human being brings forth a human being, and a child has the same human nature as the parents. The Lord likewise regenerates His children according to His image. He makes them partakers of the divine nature, and *'followers of God, as dear children'*" (Brakel).¹⁵

The relation of adoption to regeneration has been debated. While some equate them, it's best to distinguish them. "There are two ways whereby we may become members of a human family – we may be born into it or we may be adopted into it. The former is by natural generation, the latter is by legal act" (Murray).¹⁶ Christians are sons in both ways. We are reborn and adopted as sons. These are dual blessings. "Adoption gives us the rights of children, regeneration gives us the nature of children: we are partakers of both of these, for we are sons" (CHS).¹⁷ "Adoption is the new creature in a new relationship to God – as a child of God" (MLJ).¹⁸ "As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name; who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (Jn.1:12-13). "No one is adopted legally, who is not also regenerated, or born from above" (Buchanan).¹⁹ "Those whom God makes sons, He makes saints" (Watson).²⁰

¹¹ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 187

¹² Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 766

¹³ Shorter Catechism, Q.34

¹⁴ Thomas Boston, *Works*, 1:624

¹⁵ Wilhelmius a Brakel, *Reasonable Service*, 2:419

¹⁶ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 133

¹⁷ C.H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia*, Volumes 1-2, 74

¹⁸ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible*, 3:179

¹⁹ James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification*, 262

²⁰ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, 233

Adoption gives us the *privilege* of sons, regeneration the *nature* of sons. Adoption *relates* us to God as a father, regeneration *engraves* upon us the *features* of a father. Adoption makes us *relatively* his sons by conferring a right (Jn.1:12). Regeneration makes us *formally* his sons by conveying a principle (1Pet.1:23). By adoption we are *instated* in the divine affection; by regeneration we are *partakers* of the divine nature.²¹

(b) They receive the Spirit of adoption. "For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father' (Rom.8:15). "Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, Abba, Father" (Gal.4:6)! To receive "the Spirit of Adoption" is to receive the Holy Spirit who assures us of our adoption. "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God" (Rom.8:16). "Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God" (1Jn.3:1)! The Spirit enables us to know and believe that love (1Jn.4:16). It's the ministry of the Spirit to make Christians realize with increasing clarity the meaning of their family relationship with God in Christ" (Packer).²² "The Spirit of Christ testifies to the heart and conscience of a believer that he is freed from all engagements unto the family of Satan, and is become a son of God (Rom.8:15-16)" (Owen).²³ "The Spirit of adoption discovers God to the believing soul, as a kind and indulgent Father" (Witsius).²⁴

The hope which sustains the heart of the Christian, the joy which arises within him, the secret refreshment which he experiences in devotional exercises, and the enlargement of his soul in prayer; these are the blessed fruits of the presence and agency of the Spirit of adoption.²⁵

(c) They have access to the throne of grace. "They have access to the throne of grace with boldness, [and] are enabled to cry Abba, Father." Having received the Spirit of adoption, we are enabled to approach the throne of grace with boldness, crying "Abba, Father." "In an intimate manner they bring their needs before Him, and with tearful eyes they tell Him what their sorrow is" (Brakel).²⁶ "God allows His children to draw near to Him with freedom, to pour out their hearts before Him, to make all their requests known to Him" (Shaw).²⁷ Thus our adoption and prayer are often related. "In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name" (Matt.6:9). "If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him" (Lk.11:13).

(d) They receive Fatherly care. "[They] are pitied, protected, and provided for." "God is to believers all that is implied in the character of a Father. He bears the most tender love to them; He watches over them with unwearied care; He attends to their interests, and they may repose entire confidence upon His wisdom and goodness" (Dick).²⁸ "I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty" (2Cor.6:18). First, He pities them. "As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him" (Ps.103:13). "The word pity usually has somewhat negative connotations in modern usage, but here it describes something positive: divine compassion. When God adopts us into His family, He cares about us" (Sproul).²⁹ Second, He protects them. "God has His eye upon

²¹ Stephen Charnock, *Works*, 3:90

²² J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 199

²³ John Owen, *Works*, 2:210

²⁴ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 1:456

²⁵ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 3:415

²⁶ Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 2:423

²⁷ Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith*, 140

²⁸ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 3:413

²⁹ R.C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess*, 286

them as a Father, to keep them so that no evil will befall them. How safely may such a child rest and trust under the shadow of His wings! He need neither fear nor be anxious, for the Lord cares for him" (Brakel).³⁰ "Numerous are their spiritual enemies, and manifold the dangers to which they are exposed; but He who neither slumbers nor sleeps, watches over them with unwearied care" (Shaw).³¹ Third, He provides for them. "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (Matt.6:31-32).

(e) They are chastened. "[They are] chastened by Him as by a Father." "For whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives" (Heb.12:6). "Inestimably rich is the blessing of divine discipline" (Dagg).³² "The Father never writes us off. His hand can be heavy upon us at times, but it is the pressure of holy, fatherly, gracious love" (Sproul).³³ "Paternal correction is not withheld when necessary. This indeed, they are apt to regard as a punishment rather than a privilege; but it is the fruit of paternal love, it is intended for their profit, and is promised as a blessing (Ps.89:30-34)" (Shaw).³⁴

(f) They are sealed to the day of redemption. "Yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption." "Having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession" (Eph.1:13-14). By "redemption of the purchased possession" is meant the glorification of our bodies. "We eagerly wait for the adoption, the redemption of our body" (Rom.8:23). "While believers have now been adopted as God's sons, they are waiting for the public display of their standing as children of God. As of right now their bodies are still subject to death" (Hendriksen).³⁵ "Now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1Jn.3:2).

The sealing of the Spirit has been understood in two ways: first, as an objective sign. "In the ancient world, kings had signet rings to put their permanent impression in wax on documents to guarantee their legitimacy. Similarly, God places His permanent mark on our souls. He puts His name on us and seals us forever" (Sproul).³⁶ "Believers, after they have already believed, receive that working of the Holy Spirit whereby they are sealed, as it were, with a sign of their inheritance (Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30; Gal.3:14)" (Ames).³⁷ Second, as a subjective seal. "The Spirit seals or authenticates to us the fact that we are the sons of God, truly His people, and heirs, joint-heirs with Christ, of a glorious inheritance" (MLJ).³⁸ The Spirit is the "guarantee" or "down payment" of our inheritance. He enables us to enjoy something of heaven on earth.

(g) They inherit the promises as heirs of everlasting salvation. "There is an inheritance which belongs to the family of God, and every man who is received into it is an heir" (Dick).³⁹ "The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ" (Rom.8:16-17).

³⁰ Wilhelmus a Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, 2:421

³¹ Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith*, 140

³² J.L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology and Church Order*, 1:276

³³ R.C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess*, 287

³⁴ Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith*, 140

³⁵ William Hendriksen, *Romans*, 271

³⁶ R.C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess*, 287

³⁷ William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 167

³⁸ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *An exposition of Ephesians 1*, 266

³⁹ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 3:419