

The Biblical Doctrine of Adoption

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1. Adoption = to be brought into relationship with the Father, in a manner which bestows full rights of sonship and full paternal intimacy.
 - a. This is a work of the Triune God. It is the Father who adopts; the Son in whom that adoption takes place (by virtue of believers' union with him); and the Spirit of the Father (poured out through the Son) who as 'the Spirit of adoption', brings us into relationship with the Father in the Son and teaches us to cry 'Abba'.
 - b. This work is also a redemptional work in that
 - i. we were enslaved to another 'father' by virtue of our sin and guilt, and thus needed to be redeemed; and
 - ii. our relationship with the Father could not be established by mere *fiat*, since adoption that does not deal with human sinfulness would be impossible to God, the *holy* Father. We could not be his sons truly, if our sin and guilt were not destroyed, as we could never be conformed to the image of the Son, which is the Father's purpose for his adopted children.
 - c. Adoption, therefore, is not possible only by dint of Incarnation alone. There must be an actual rescue and change of relationship brought about by the work of the Cross if adoption in any meaningful sense of the term is to be made possible.
 - i. In this context it is worth noting Jesus' words in John 8:35-36. The freedom which Jesus brings is the freedom of sonship, as opposed to the bondage of slavery. The 'sons of Abraham' to whom Jesus was speaking assumed that his words referred to physical slavery, when in fact he spoke of spiritual slavery to a false 'father'. This slavery is due in to the rejection of the grace and love of God, in favour of a 'legal' relationship with God based on works of the law. Paul's exposition of this is set out in Galatians 3:22-4:6, and it is also reflected in his personal testimony in such passages as Acts 26:4-18 cf. Philippians 3:1-11; Titus 3:3-7; etc. The spiritual enemies known as the Flesh and the Law work hand in glove to keep us in bondage, doing the bidding of the father of lies.
 - ii. The biblical doctrine of redemption (which has slavery as its background) therefore forms an integral part of Jesus' understanding of his mission. He has come to set free (i.e. redeem) slaves by making them sons. In the Old Testament a redeeming party had to fulfil certain conditions i.e. they had to be a blood relative of the person in need of redemption; they had to be a free person themselves; they needed to be willing to redeem; and they needed to have the wherewithal to meet the purchase price. Jesus fulfilled all of these elements, so he alone can bring the gift of true sonship to the world.
 - iii. 'Redemption' connotes the power under which a person is enslaved and from which they need to be freed, though in the

Old Testament (in relation to Israel) God's adopted son by covenant is always God's property. He claims back what is his from the usurper powers such as Pharaoh.

1. In some instances, Paul closely attaches himself to the OT conception of the word. There is a well defined eschatological usage of the term "redemption" in his epistles, which has associated with it the thought that God will in the last day recover what is originally or in principle His own. Thus in Romans 8:23 the apostle speaks of the "redemption of the body" as an act of adoption, i.e., he recognizes in it the logical result of the relation of sonship in which the believer stands to God.....especially in two passages of the epistle to the Ephesians do we find an exact reproduction of the Old Testament idea. In 1:14 the Holy Spirit appears as the earnest of our inheritance, which earnest is given with a view to the redemption of God's own possession. And in 4:30 the readers are said to have been sealed in the Holy Spirit of God unto the day of redemption. The Holy Spirit marks them as God's property which he will reclaim at the end. G. Vos *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* p 367.
 - iv. 'Reconciliation' is a term that points to the restoration of relationship by virtue of just judgement being enacted. Erstwhile sons need to be reconciled to the Father to receive the gift of adoption. In reconciliation we encounter a complex of ideas such as expiation, propitiation and justification. However, the main thing to keep in mind is that this is God's work, and the work of the Son in relation to bearing of sin is that God's holiness would be satisfied ever before any human hearts find comfort from a 'warm and fuzzy' Fatherhood.
2. The relationship into which we are adopted is congruent with our nature by creation.
 - a. The whole of humanity was created in God's image and was to participate in the intimate, full and tender relationship that being children of the Father implied, as well as receiving the full rights embodied in the status of 'sons of God' (without reference to gender!).
 - i. Sonship and image bearing go together, not simply in Genesis 1:26ff. and 5:1-3, but clearly in the New Testament teaching on our final *telos* as God's image bearers (e.g. Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 15:49; Eph. 1:3-14; Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2; etc.). We are made sons of God at the *eschaton*, but revealed and perfected in that which we already have (Col. 3:1-4 cf. 1 John 3:2a; Rom. 8:14ff.)
 - ii. In a very real sense we cannot understand the glory of our sonship merely by inferring it from the creation accounts. As with many aspects of the Christian faith, we must read from the *telos* backwards, but even this is only possible because of the coming of the Son into our midst.
 - b. Adam was the 'son of God' (Luke 3:38). There is a sense in which we need to affirm that God is the Father of all men and women (Acts 17:28-29). However, not all men and women are 'sons of God' in the sense of redemption/adoption, which is known only by grace through faith (Gal. 3:6, 26 cf. Rom. 9:7-8; John 8:31-59).

- i. God, as the loving Father of all men and women, provides for our needs and tends us with loving care (e.g. Psalm 104; Matt. 5:44-48; Luke 12:13-34; Acts 14:17; 17:24-25). He gives freely, begrudging nothing, and through the Son upholds all things that he has made (Heb. 1:1-4).
 - ii. However, he has sent his Son into the world to gather his family (John 11:52 cf. Eph. 1:5; Rom. 8:29-30), and this gathering is spoken of in terms of elective grace.
 - iii. The family thus gathered does not belong to the world. Indeed it is rejected by the world (in the theological sense of the term) on account of the Father whose family believers are (1 John 3:1 cf. Jn. 15:18-23; 16:3; etc.). This is because the world belongs to a different ‘father’ (e.g. 1 John 3:12 cf. John 8:44).
 - c. Jesus’ identity as fully and truly human emphasises the fact that we have been created to know the Father. Jesus’ knowledge of the Father, *as a man may know the Father*, is not predicated on his Deity. Sonship is, properly speaking, the pinnacle of human nature and the full expression of the image of God with which we have been endowed.
 - i. Jesus, as the Son of the Father, is thus truly and fully what a human being was created to be!
 - ii. Our sonship will be nothing other than full conformity with his!
3. The biblical theology of covenant is ‘adoptive’ in its action and intent.
- a. The act of God’s entering into covenant relationship is elective and thus adoptive. The intention of that elective act is that God would be known as ‘their God’ and the covenant partners would be ‘his people’.
 - i. In Romans 9:4-5, therefore, we see the close connection between covenant and adoption; and these are closely connected to all other aspects of the privileges that belonged to Israel as God’s covenant son.
 - ii. This link between adoption and covenant is seen elsewhere (e.g. Ex. 4:22 cf. Hos. 11:1; Deut. 7:6) and it thus means that Israel, as God’s adopted covenant son-people knew God as Covenant-Father (e.g. Deut. 32:6; Is. 63:16; 64:8; Jer. 3:19; 31:9; Mal. 1:6; 2:10; etc.)
 - b. Israel was a holy nation (in that they belonged to the Holy God, who had made them holy to himself) and a royal priesthood (in that they were the son-people of the Great King, and in this were the representatives of God to the nations, not least in their worship).
 - i. Exodus 19:5-6 indicates that the full blessing of this would be known to Israel only as they remained in covenant faithfulness. The history of their relationship with God is that they proved themselves faithless (Jer. 3:14, 22), but he remained faithful (Hos. 6:1f; 11:1ff.) , even to the point of sending the Son himself, first for the people of Israel (Matt. 10:5-6; 15:24 cf. Rom. 15:8) and then to gather the children of God scattered throughout the world (John 10:16; 11:52)
 - c. We can thus understand that forging of a new covenant in the blood of the son is inseparably linked to the Father’s desire to have his full family brought in. The ‘new covenant’ passages in the Old Testament

(e.g. Jer. 31:31-34; 32:40; Ezk. 34:23; 36:22ff.; 37:22-26) all have forgiveness as their basis, and in their contexts all relate to the gathering in of the children of God. This may be seen as a second exodus, and is a key New Testament theme.

4. The act of adoption is only made possible because of the action of God in Christ propitiating his wrath and bringing his children to new life through forgiveness.
 - a. The contrast in Ephesians 2:1-10 is between our state once as ‘children of wrath’ and our state now as those raised up to new life in Christ as God’s workmanship. Believers are those who have passed out of wrath into life (John 3:36 cf. Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:9; Eph. 5:6), and this clearly only by the grace of God. We do not have a ‘lost’ sonship, in the sense that we can simply pick up the pieces and start over! Our sin has turned sonship into another substance...whereby we stand over and against God, and have become his enemies. We do not *want* to go back to the Father, and, indeed, because he is the holy Father (and our sin is against him alone) he cannot welcome us back ‘all things considered’.
 - i. In Pauline theology being ‘under wrath’ or ‘raised with Christ’ is one of a series of parallels, which have their own distinct emphases, but which all tend to the same point. There is a difference between being in darkness and the light; between being under sin and under grace; in living under a sentence of ‘justified’ rather than a verdict of ‘condemned’; in being ‘dead’ and ‘alive’ etc.
 - ii. To be adopted as sons must mean that the curse of sin, and the wrath of God known in sin itself, must be removed. This could only come about by the Son’s willing oblation of himself and the Father’s desire that this happen. On the cross, then, Jesus was ‘abandoned up’ for us all (Rom. 8:32 cf. 1:24, 26, 28 where the same word is used). Paradoxically, on the Cross Jesus was the most beloved Son of the Father, in whom the Father was well pleased, and the most cursed entity in the whole cosmos. In that abandonment, which was unmitigated (compared to the attenuated curse under which fallen humanity lives), where he was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21) he became ‘a worm and not a man’ (Ps. 22:6) and all the semblance of his sonship was taken away by judgement (Is. 53:8). Yet, in the Spirit who enabled him to go that place of utter dereliction, he overcame the sin which he carried so that he could again commend himself to the Father. In so doing, he was settled in the hope of the resurrection, which vindicated his action on the Cross, and he saw the travail of his soul and was satisfied. This satisfaction lies in seeing that the righteous judgement of God is completed and also that the fruit of his travail has been brought in, through that righteous judgement, and now belong to the Father. The whole Godhead participated in that travail...the Son in the abandonment, the Father as he abandoned him up, and the Spirit by whom the Son offered

himself to God. The whole Godhead is satisfied in what they have done. So great a love has the Father bestowed on us that we are fellow-heirs with Christ, by the power of the Spirit! The whole of the Triune Godhead looks on the redeemed family with great joy.

- b. The children of God are led by the Spirit of the Father, and no longer belong to the Flesh. Flesh and Spirit are opposed to one another (as spiritual ‘entities’) and to be in the Flesh is to be enslaved to a series of terrible tyrants such as death; condemnation; the Law (in its function to bring and confirm us in guilt); the world; a tormented conscience; etc. But in Romans 8:14-16 believers are those being led by the Spirit. This is not in an existential sense (as though we can fall in and out of being sons of God, as to whether we are being ‘led’ at that point) but in the sense of not being in the Flesh (as in Rom. 8:5ff.) and being in the realm of the Spirit, since Flesh and Spirit stand for two realms of existence in Paul (e.g. Gal. 5:17;). The sons of God are those born of the Spirit of God (as in Gal. 4:29). To be born of the Spirit is to be a son of God (e.g. Gal. 3:26; 4:1-7)
- c. The reality of new birth (as in John 1:12f.; 3:3-6) and regeneration (as in Titus 3:4-7)—which are two sides of the one event—cannot be separated from the action of Christ as our Redeemer. In John 3, for example, the discussion with Nicodemus leads to Jesus’ exposition of his work in terms of the serpent being lifted up in the wilderness and then the necessity of faith in him that men and women may receive eternal life. In Titus, the mention of regeneration is in the midst of a complex of ideas such as mercy, the action of the Spirit in washing us, the reality of justification in Christ and our inheritance (i.e. as sons of God).
 - i. While not being formally part of our discussion about adoption, the concept of inheritance is of a piece with that of sonship, and so the inheritance we have been granted from the Father in the Son is closely linked with our adoption. This is particularly clear, for example, in Paul’s discussion of sonship, inheritance and (eschatological) adoption in Romans 8.
- d. While the concept of ‘regeneration’ is linked with adoption, as also with justification, each has its own field of meaning and specific frame of reference.
 - i. Some theologians express adoption as the other side of justification...the latter speaking of our acquittal and the former of our acceptance by the Father. While not wishing to make a complete identification between justification and adoption, it is clear that ‘Paul speaks of [*huiiothesia*, adoption] in a juridical sense. Just as on the basis of Christ’s righteousness believers receive the forgiveness of sins, so that are also adopted as children...This adoption, which therefore rests on a declaration of God, has been procured by Christ (Gal. 4:5) and becomes ours by faith (3:26). Those who have been pronounced free from the guilt and punishment of sin are thereby simultaneously adopted as children and accounted as objects of God’s fatherly love. Believers are thereby put into the same position as Christ, who is the firstborn among many brothers (Rom. 8:29). He was the Son of God by nature (8:32) and was so designated by his resurrection (1:3);

believers become the children of God by adoption. H. Bavinck
Reformed Dogmatics 4:227.

- e. What must be strongly emphasised is that adoption (as with all aspects of the identity we have as believers) is the personal experience of our grace-faith union with Christ. We have no life outside of him, nor do we have any experience of sonship, justification, sanctification or glorification outside of Christ. But in and with him we have all these things, eternally and irreversibly. That we have these things freely given to us by God redounds to God's glory, and to the glory of his grace (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14).
 - i. Scripture teaches that God does all things for his own sake (Prov. 16:4; Rom 11:36). The final ground and ultimate purpose, also of Christ's incarnation and satisfaction, cannot lie in a creature, in the salvation of the sinner, but has to lie in God Himself. For his own sake, he sent his son into the world as an expiation for our sins that his attributes and perfections might thus be manifested. And indeed, there is no fact that so powerfully brings those perfections of God to the fore as Christ's incarnation and satisfaction. Not just one attribute is brilliantly illuminated by these events, but all of them together: his wisdom, grace, love, mercy, long-suffering, righteousness, holiness, power and so on. ...Christ in his own person, word, and work, is the supremely perfect, comprehensive revelation of God: his servant, his image, his son. He has made known to us the Father. H. Bavinck
Reformed Dogmatics 3.371
5. Adoption is personal in that we are brought in love to call God 'Abba'. This is the cry of the Son (e.g. Mk. 14:36) and lies behind every use of the term 'Father' in the gospels.
- a. The Spirit of the Son teaches us to cry Abba, too (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6) with the same assurance, comfort, warmth, tenderness, intimacy and trust that the cry meant for the Son himself.
 - b. This cry is the deepest affection that a human being can express towards God and at the same time the pinnacle of human dignity and glory. Our adoption as sons of the Father—in all the glorious truth and irreversible reality embodied in the cry of Abba—means that we come boldly to the throne of grace, and present every need of our hearts to the Father in prayer...even if we do not know how to pray as we ought
 - i. Paul...purposely says 'crying'[in Rom. 8:15] to indicate the trial of the Christian who is still weak and believes weakly....It is a very great comfort when Paul says here that the Spirit of Christ, sent by God into our hearts, cries, 'Abba, Father!' and when in Rom. 8:26 that He helps us in our weakness and intercedes with sighs too deep for words...for in his trial a man feels only the power of sin, the weakness of the flesh, and his doubt; he feels the fiery darts of the devil (Eph. 6:16), the terrors of death, and the wrath and judgements of God. All these things issue powerful and horrible cries against us, so that there appears to be nothing left for us except despair and eternal death. But in the midst of the terrors of the Law, thunderclaps of sin, tremors of death and roarings of the devil, Paul says the Holy Spirit begins to cry in our heart: 'Abba, Father!' And his cry vastly exceeds and breaks through, the powerful and horrible cries of the Law, sin, death, and the devil. It penetrates the clouds of heaven, and it reaches all the way to the ears of God. (Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 26, p. 380f.)

6. Though a real and present reality now, adoption is also an eschatological event (Rom. 8:11, 19, 23, cf. 1 John 3:2) and linked with the great theme of inheritance.
 - a. Believers are 'sons of the resurrection' (Lk. 20:36) in some sense meaning that that is where their sonship is fully seen and known. In this current age their sonship, though no less real and secure, is deeply embattled and under attack from the world, the flesh and the devil.
 - b. In the midst of the ongoing battle with the 'father' of this world, we have the great gift of being given the Spirit as the pledge, guarantee and seal of our sonship/inheritance (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30). The images are drawn from a variety of sources, but all emphasise both the utter security of the Father's children and the fact that they await the time when his promise to them will be fulfilled.
 - c. Because of the eschatological nature of this aspect of adoption, adoption is closely linked to both faith and hope. Where the knowledge of our sonship and the Father's love for us wanes, faith and hope both wither.

7. Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 12
 - a. All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for his only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption, by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God, have his name put upon them, receive the Spirit of adoption, have access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry, Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for, and chastened by him, as by a father: yet never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption; and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting salvation