

# Pulpit & People

**Essays in honour of William Still  
on his 75th birthday**

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# THE REFORMED DOCTRINE OF SONSHIP

SINCLAIR B. FERGUSON

In his famous (and controversial) William Cunningham Lectures entitled *The Fatherhood of God*, R. S. Candlish expressed his purpose in these words:

My object is chiefly a practical one. It is to bring out the import and bearing of the Scriptural doctrine respecting the Fatherhood of God as an influential element in Christian experience.<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this essay is to look at the same relationship between Christian experience and the Fatherhood of God, but to do so from a different perspective, namely from the standpoint of the Christian's sonship. Four areas will be discussed briefly: the development and demise of the doctrine in Christian theology; the centrality of the doctrine in biblical theology; its usefulness as a perspective on the nature of salvation; the illumination it yields for our relationship with God.

## Sonship: Development and Demise of a Doctrine

If one paints the history of theology with a broad brush, it is clear that neither the early nor the mediaeval church expressed much interest in the idea of the Christian life as a life of *sonship*. The controversies of both periods lay elsewhere. Furthermore, the methods of biblical interpretation adopted were virtually incapable of isolating sonship as a central theme in biblical theology. In the case of mediaeval theology, with its development of an elongated *ordo salutis*, its distinction between unformed faith and faith formed by love (*fides informis; fides formata charitate*), its emphasis on penance, purgatory and the place of indulgences, the doctrine of the ordinary Christian as a child of God entitled to all the privileges and joys of fellowship with a loving Father, would have had devastating effects.<sup>2</sup>

Devastating effects did occur, of course, in the Reformation. But it was Luther's doctrine of justification by faith which produced them. However, in the context of this essay, it needs to be said that Luther's stress on justification was at the expense of emphasising the privilege of sonship. Sonship, insofar as it is discussed, is subservient to justification. At best it is the *seal* of justification. The recognition that sonship is 'the apex of redemptive grace and privilege',<sup>3</sup> higher in

1. R. S. Candlish, *The Fatherhood of God*. Edinburgh 1864. p. 103.

2. Still a valuable popular introduction to this is to be found in T. M. Lindsay, *History of the Reformation*, Edinburgh 1906, I, pp. 216-227.

3. J. Murray, *Collected Writings* Edinburgh, 1977, 2, p. 233.

nature than justification, is one to which Luther would probably not have warmed!

It was left to the reformed theological tradition, following the lead of Calvin, to recover this biblical emphasis. Even within that tradition, the emphasis has appeared somewhat spasmodically.

Students of Calvin's theology have too rarely recognised how important the concept of sonship was to his understanding of the Christian life. (We do not readily adjust to the notion that the young man who was known by his classmates as 'the accusative case' later revelled in the idea of being God's child!) While there is no separate chapter on sonship in the *Institutes*, *adoptio* (sonship) is one of the expressions by which he most frequently designates the idea of being a Christian. He does not treat sonship as a separate *locus* of theology precisely because it is a concept which undergirds everything he writes.

Calvin's *Institutes* began life as what the title page called a *summa pietatis* (sum of piety). But for Calvin, piety meant recognising that our lives are nourished by God's *Fatherly* care;<sup>4</sup> it meant knowing oneself to be a child of God. Similarly, Calvin saw the purpose of the incarnation and atonement to be the adoption of Christians.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the 'first title' of the Spirit is 'Spirit of adoption'.<sup>6</sup> The knowledge of adoption is the believer's consolation in suffering.<sup>7</sup> It is no surprise then, to the reader of the *Institutes*, to encounter Calvin at his most eloquent when he comes to expound the phrase 'Our Father' in the Lord's Prayer.<sup>8</sup> As Émile Doumergue has succinctly expressed it, for Calvin 'It is the knowledge of his Fatherly love that is the true knowledge of God'.<sup>9</sup>

Despite occasional statements to the contrary, this emphasis of Calvin was kept alive within the Puritan tradition. William Ames' famous lectures in Leyden in 1620-22, later to be published as his *Marrow of Sacred Divinity*,<sup>10</sup> contained an entire section on adoption, and in characteristically Puritan fashion offered a series of twenty-seven different points of exposition. Further discussion took place in the writings of other Puritans, perhaps most notably in the sensitive exposition of the Independent theologian, John Owen.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, for Owen, the doctrine of adoption was intimately related to the idea of communion and fellowship with God.

Paradoxically to those who regard the Westminster Confession of Faith as a document breathing all too little of the fresh air of Calvin's theology, it is in the Westminster Confession (followed by its cousins,

4. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.ii.1.

5. *Ibid.*, II.xii.2. cf. II.xiv.5-6.

6. *Ibid.*, III.i.3.

7. *Ibid.*, III.viii.8.

8. *Ibid.*, III.xxi.7.

9. Émile Doumergue, *Jean Calvin: Les hommes et les choses de son temps*, Lausanne, 1910, IV, pp. 90-1. It is significant that Doumergue devotes several pages in his exposition of Calvin's doctrine of God to the idea of God as Father.

10. The Latin edition appeared in 1623 and was later followed by an English edition in 1638.

11. John Owen, *Collected Works* ed. W. H. Goold, Edinburgh, 1850-53, 2, pp. 207-222.

the Independent *Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order* and the Baptist London or Philadelphia *Confession of Faith*) that the doctrine of adoption is given a separate chapter in a confession of the Christian Church. Perhaps more than anything else it is the presence of this brief chapter which has kept alive within Presbyterianism (particularly in Scotland and the Southern Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.) the significance of sonship in the life of faith.

The doctrine of adoption suffered considerable demise in later years. The view that it was simply the 'positive side' of justification — Luther's rather than Calvin's view — never really died. It is to be found in some of the classical expositions of theology in the reformed tradition. Charles Hodge remains silent on the theme of adoption in his *Systematic Theology*<sup>12</sup>. His remarkable contemporary, R. L. Dabney (right-hand man to none other than 'Stonewall' Jackson!) devoted some twenty-two lines only to it in his *Lectures in Systematic Theology*.<sup>13</sup> Despite the efforts of Candlish in Scotland and such Southern Presbyterians as J. L. Girardeau, in his *Discussion of Theological Questions* and R. A. Webb, in his somewhat disappointing *Reformed Doctrine of Adoption*, sonship was denied the place in systematic theology which biblical teaching would suggest it merited.

The reason for its demise in the reformed theological tradition may be traced back to the profound influence on English-speaking reformed theology of Turretin's monumental *Theological Institutes*. Turretin did give consideration to the question of sonship, but did so by posing the question 'What is the adoption which is given to us in justification?'<sup>14</sup> The form in which the question was asked assured the continuing subservience of adoption to justification, and its secondary rather than climactic position in theological thinking. Turretin answered his own question in these terms:

Adoption is included in justification as a part, which with the remission of sins constitutes the whole of this benefit; nor can it be distinguished from adoption.<sup>15</sup>

Turretin did have the great merit of linking Christian liberty to the idea of adoption, but the formulation he gave to the relation between justification and adoption became the bench-mark for most later expositions.

This long-standing tradition, linked with the influence of nineteenth century Liberalism's emphasis on the universal Fatherhood of God and the corresponding universal sonship and brotherhood of man might have seemed to sound the death-knell of the doctrine of adoption. Evangelical teaching in general fought shy of the employ-

12. C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1872-3, r.i. London, 1960, vol. III.

13. R. L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, Richmond 1878, p. 627. Cf. also L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids 1941), pp. 515-6.

14. F. Turretin, *Opera*, Edinburgh 1847, II, p. 585: 'Quod sit adoptio quae nobis in justificatione datur? I. Altera pars justificatione est adoptio.'

15. *Ibid.*

ment of language (Fatherhood of God, sonship of man) which had become hallmarks of Liberalism and Universalism.

Voices have, however, cried in the wilderness. In addition to Candlish, Girardeau and Webb, honourable mention must be made of the two Baptist theologians John Gill<sup>16</sup> and James Petigru Boyce.<sup>17</sup> More recently John Murray<sup>18</sup> and James I. Packer<sup>19</sup> have lent their weight to a recovery of the doctrine of sonship. Perhaps more than any other influence, the impact of biblical theology on systematic theology has demanded a reorientation of soteriology towards the concept of sonship. The doctrine may therefore be on the verge of a long-awaited reinstatement to the position it occupied in Calvin's thought, one which pervades the whole ethos of the Christian life.

### The Centrality of Sonship in Biblical Doctrine

There are two ways in which the centrality of sonship is evident in Scripture:

(i) In the programmatic texts of the New Testament it is commonplace to discover an emphasis on sonship. When the writers discuss the flow of God's plan, from election through the flow of the history of redemption, the purpose of the incarnation and the accomplishments of the atonement, sonship is a central focus. The new covenant introduces the church to a new experience of sonship; the work of the Spirit in conforming us to Christ has sonship in view — Christ is to be the firstborn among many brothers (see, for example, Gal. 3:26-4:7; Eph. 1:3-6; Rom. 8:28-31; Heb. 2:10-18).

(ii) In the wider context of biblical theology, sonship is stressed in three distinct ways:

(a) Sonship is the focus of creation. Reformed theologians and exegetes have debated whether Adam in creation was a son of God or was intended to be adopted as a son following a period of testing in Eden. The state of the question has rested a good deal on whether Luke 3:38 gives positive encouragement to think of Adam as the *created* son of God. More recently Jeremias has underlined the significance of the Adam-Christ parallel which follows the announcement of Luke 3:38, as the Last Adam is exposed to the wilderness temptations as the Son of God. The case for thinking of Adam's relationship to God as *filial* in nature is strengthened by two considerations: the lavishness of the provision made for him, in Genesis 2 (a father's love expressed for his son); the intimate connection between sonship and image in Genesis 1:26-8 and Genesis 5:1-3.

16. John Gill, *Body of Divinity*, London 1769-70, Book VI, chap. 9.

17. James Petigru Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology*, 1887. See especially his judicious criticisms of other reformed theologians on pp. 404-409.

18. J. Murray, *Redemption — Accomplished and Applied*, Grand Rapids, 1955, pp. 132-140; *Collected Writings*, 2, pp. 223-234.

19. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, London 1973, pp. 223-257.

In either case — whether Adam was created as a child of God or to enter into the enjoyment of sonship — the filial relation lies at the heart of God's creating purposes.

(b) Sonship is the pattern of redemption. When God redeems his people in the Old Testament, it is the filial model which most eloquently describes the relationship between the Lord and his people. Moses tells Pharaoh that God's word is 'Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you "Let my son go, so he may worship me" but you refused to let him go; so I will kill your firstborn son' (Ex. 4:22-3). The basis for Moses later upbraiding the people is precisely this: 'Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?' (Deut. 32:6). Again the Father-son metaphor appears in the exquisite picture of the Exodus in Deuteronomy 1:31: 'You saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place'.

This is what Paul refers to as 'the adoption as sons' (Rom. 9:4). Adoption is not itself an Old Testament concept.<sup>20</sup> But the Roman legal metaphor which Paul borrowed from the world in which he lived admirably summarised the *nature* of the sonship unveiled by the Old Testament and brought to fulfilment in Jesus Christ. Yet even the Old Testament pictures the salvation of God's people in language which is tantamount to adoption:

This is what the Sovereign Lord says to Jerusalem: Your ancestry and birth were in the land of the Canaanites; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite. On the day you were born your cord was not cut, nor were you washed with water to make you clean, nor were you rubbed with salt or wrapped in cloth. No one looked on you with pity or had compassion enough to do any of these things for you. Rather you were thrown out into the open field, for on the day you were born you were despised.

Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, 'live!' I made you grow like a plant of the field. You grew up and developed . . .

Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into covenant with you, declares the Sovereign Lord, and you became mine.

Ezekiel 16:3-8

Salvation is God taking the fondling child and bringing it into a new family relationship altogether. It is adoption into the covenant of love.

(c) Sonship is also the goal of restoration. The entire process of sanctification, leading to the final restoration of glorification, is intended to bring to perfection our sonship to the Father. We are being transformed into the likeness of Christ in order that he might be the firstborn of many brothers (Rom. 8:29). This is the 'One, far-off, divine event, to which the whole creation moves' (Tennyson). But it is

20. See F. Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens and Sons: Legal metaphors in the Epistles*, Grand Rapids 1984, pp. 67-99.

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20. See F. Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens and Sons: Legal metaphors in the Epistles*, Grand Rapids 1984, pp. 67-99.

not so far-off from the biblical point of view. Already we are sons of God (1 Jn. 3:1-3). It does not yet appear what we shall be. But even now the creation 'stands on tiptoe' waiting to see the sons of God 'come into their own' (Rom. 8:19 cf. J. B. Phillips translation). The process of sanctification is, in essence, the reproduction of the family-likeness in the people of God; it involves us being transformed to be more and more like the Elder Brother, because he is the express likeness of the Father.

We might therefore summarise the grace of the gospel by saying that it involves adoption into the family of God, with the corresponding process of ridding us of the influences of our former family and more and more remaking us to conform to the Incarnate Son.

### Sonship as an Organising Principle for Understanding Salvation

The question of the most appropriate model by which to understand salvation has been much debated in reformed theology. It has been characteristic, for example, for reformed theology to make considerable use of the idea of ordered experience (*ordo salutis*). As we have already noted, characteristic of Lutheran theology has been the principle of justification.

It is probably an error of some magnitude to insist that only one principle should be employed to unify one's understanding of the nature of salvation. Scripture provides us with various models, of which justification is but one. Sonship may well be proposed as another.

Any organising principle for the doctrine of salvation must meet certain important biblical tests: Does it convey the covenantal perspective of the Bible? Does it arise out of the flow of redemptive history? Is it eschatological in nature (that is, does it express the 'already/not yet' tension which is so characteristic of the New Testament's view of present Christian existence)? Does it centre on Jesus Christ?

Sonship meets each of these tests in a satisfactory manner. It is a covenantal concept. Simply expressed, biblical covenants bind individuals to the family. God's covenant binds men and women to his family as his children. It is a blood covenant making Christians 'blood-brothers'. Notice the extent to which the events surrounding the covenant of the Exodus are described in terms of God establishing the Father-son relationship (Deut. 1:31; Jer. 31:9; Hos. 11:1 etc.).

But sonship is also a concept through which the development of salvation in biblical history is encapsulated. It does not 'flatten out' the contours of redemptive history. In the Old Testament period (until Pentecost), God's people are indeed his children. But they are as yet under age; they have not been brought to mature sonship. They are heirs in their minority. But now, by contrast, we have 'come of age' in the era of the Spirit of sonship. This is the trend of thought in Paul's argument in Galatians 3:23-4:7. Not only so, but we look forward to

yet fuller dimensions of the experience of sonship (1 Jn. 3:1-3). It does not yet appear what we shall be!

Consequently, sonship is characterised *now* by the tension between what has *already* been accomplished for us in Christ and what is *yet to be* accomplished. We already possess the adoption as sons and the presence of the Spirit of adoption. But precisely because of that, we long for its consummation. Those who have the Spirit of adoption (the 'firstfruits of the Spirit') *groan*, says Paul (Rom. 8:23). Why? Because enjoying the privileges of sons now, we anticipate the glorious liberty of sons in the future when we receive the 'adoption as sons' which Paul describes variously as 'the redemption of our bodies' and 'the glorious freedom of the children of God' and a 'share in his glory' (Rom. 8:23, 21, 19).

Sonship, then, has a retrospective and a prospective dimension. It recognises what has already been accomplished: we have been adopted into God's family and experience the access and liberty of grace. But it also recognises that more is still to be accomplished: we look forward to eschatological adoption, and the access and liberty of glory. The omega-point of Christian experience has not yet come for us. But it will; the fact that we are already children of God is the guarantee.

Sonship, however, is also centred in Jesus Christ. It is because he has entered our family that we enter the family of God (Heb. 2:5-18). Only because he is not ashamed to call us brothers may we call his Father, 'our Father' (cf. Jn. 20:17). Indeed it can be argued that in Pauline thought the resurrection of Christ is viewed as his 'adoption'<sup>21</sup> — not in the sense that he became Son of God in the resurrection, but insofar as he was 'marked out as the Son of God with power through the resurrection' (Rom. 1:4). He was 'firstborn from the dead', brought into the family of the new age by resurrection. Through union with Christ, in which we are 'raised into newness of life', we too are adopted into that family. It is, therefore, only in Christ, in the family fellowship we have with him, that we are adopted children of God. He has not left us orphans, after all (Jn. 14:18). He has given us the Spirit of sons (Rom. 8:15).

The biblical doctrine of sonship, therefore, well summarises the whole of the life of the Christian in relation to God.

### Sonship and the Character of God

R. S. Candlish spoke of the doctrine of the Fatherhood of God as an 'influential element in Christian experience'. We, likewise, studying the same relationship from the opposite end as it were, may say that sonship is an influential element in understanding the character of God. The New Testament reasons *both* ways: God is your Father, therefore . . . and You are God's children, therefore. . . .

21. R. B. Gaffin jr., *The Centrality of the Resurrection*, Grand Rapids, 1978, pp. 117-119.

What are the implications inherent in the idea of sonship? To paraphrase the apostle John, we may say: Look, you are the children of God. do you not realise the degree to which this shows how much God loves you (1 Jn. 3:1)? In fact John calls this love 'amazing'. It is the size and unexpectedness of it which he finds so remarkable.

By contrast we have grown somewhat accustomed to the love of God: we do not find it so very amazing. But the recognition that what we are is 'family' in relation to God, that we are his sons and daughters, and that *we* (of all people!) are his children, is calculated to produce a new and true appreciation of God as our Father. There is no higher self-image that the Christian can have, and no doctrine which will more readily help him enjoy the life of faith.

The pastoral implications of this may best be summarised by setting down, side by side, the words of the elder brother in Jesus' Parable of the Waiting Father, and the words of the apostle John. The elder brother symbolises one to whom all the privileges of God's grace have been extended, but never received. John's words express the amazed joy of one who has begun to appreciate that the gospel makes us sons and daughters of God:

Look (said the elder brother)! All these years I've been *slaving* for you (Lk. 15:29).

Look (said John)! Of what a size is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God (1 Jn. 3:1).

Of these words, John Cotton, the renowned Old and New England Puritan quaintly wrote:

This reproves men's squint looking. They do not look at God's love, but at themselves and at their own corruptions and affections. It is a wonder that God's children should pore only upon their corruptions, and not consider what love it is for God to discover them and pardon them.<sup>22</sup>

The doctrine of sonship helps to correct our spiritual squint. It enables us to see ourselves more clearly, because it helps us to see the grace of God more clearly. The doctrine of sonship undergirds the high privileges of Christian experience.

For four decades now, William Still has faithfully expressed many elements of the biblical and reformed doctrine of the Fatherhood of God and the sonship and brotherhood of believers. I salute him with gratitude as he approaches his seventy-fifth birthday, and remind him of the promise of God to all his children:

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, *and I will be his God and he will be my son.*

Revelation 21:6.

22. John Cotton, *The First Epistle of John*, 1657, ad. 3:1.