

TOGETHER *for* ADOPTION

Interview with Dr. Tim J. R. Trumper

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One of your desires for the church is that she would recover the doctrine of adoption. You've written elsewhere that adoption has not received its due attention within the history of the church. Why do you believe that adoption has been overshadowed by other doctrines?

Yes, that's right Dan. The recovery of adoption is a passionate desire of mine, and has been for some fifteen years now. Surprisingly, there have been real challenges in persuading Christian folk that this recovery is necessary. A number of factors have obscured the neglect of adoption. I'm thinking especially of:

1. The prevalence of the language of adoption in prayer (note in this regard that every true believer possesses the Spirit of adoption [[Rom. 8: 15](#); cf. [Gal. 4:6](#)]) and in hymnody (notably that of the Methodists and the Brethren).
2. The inclusion of the biblical word for adoption (hupiothesia: [Rom. 8:15, 23; 9:4](#); [Gal. 4:5](#); [Eph. 1:5](#)) in published lexicons and theological dictionaries.

If you look more broadly, however, you'll find that adoption is conspicuous by either its absence from or its scant attention in the theological texts, the creeds and the confessions of the church. Contrast its treatment with that of its neighboring doctrines. How seismic and mature have been the treatments of justification and sanctification by comparison!

Perhaps the major proof of the neglect of adoption is the availability of reasons that explain it. Note for a start how adoption has suffered in connection with the broader neglect of the doctrine of salvation (soteriology). By and large it is true to say that with the exception of the interest of Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109),

soteriology did not become a subject of sustained investigation until the Reformation. The major concerns of the early church were Trinitarian and Christological. The protracted Roman Catholic/Protestant disputes over justification ensured that soteriology came into its own as a major discussion point of the Christian church. Ironically, the interest in justification that created possibilities for the development of the doctrine of adoption became the chief reason it continued to be neglected. Simply put, adoption became thoroughly overshadowed by the controversies over justification.

Calvin's interest in adoption stands out as a notable exception (note, for example, his claim that, "the gift of adoption bestows salvation entire"). Few, however, have recognized Calvin's fondness for the adoption motif. Several reasons account for this: 1. The intensity and protraction of the general preoccupation with justification. Recall how the Reformation was followed by the Counter or Catholic Reformation. The Decrees of the Council of Trent (1545-63), which anathematized Protestants for their views, ensured the continuation of the theological preoccupation with justification. 2. The impact of the historic neglect of adoption on the study of Calvin. Readers of Calvin have simply not been looking for his thought on the doctrine. 3. The manner in which Calvin discusses adoption in his Institutes. While eight chapters are devoted to justification none are allotted to adoption. Thus Calvin's readers have found little encouragement in the Institutes to look at what he says of adoption. What has passed them by, however, is the fact that doctrines of wide-ranging significance, such as union with Christ and adoption, receive no chapter in The Institutes precisely because their lessons cannot be confined to one, two or more chapters.

Little changed with the subsiding of the battles of the Reformation. Before long, challenges to the classic Protestant understanding of justification began to develop within Protestantism itself. These challenges, which included Deism, Arianism and Socinianism, Neonomianism and Arminianism, and, surprisingly the influence of Wesley, ensured that justification remained the preoccupation of Protestant soteriology. I'll spare you their details — they can be read of in my doctoral dissertation, "An Historical Study of the Doctrine of Adoption in the Calvinistic Tradition" [University of Edinburgh, 2001, ch. 6] and in ch. 1 of my forthcoming book *When History Teaches Us Nothing* [Wipf and Stock] — sufficient to say that they became an effective disincentive to the sort of creative orthodoxy necessary for the inclusion of adoption within Protestant discussions of the doctrine of salvation. Note, for example, what appears to have been the deliberate action of John Wesley in eradicating every mention of adoption from his revision of the Westminster Assembly's Shorter Catechism (notwithstanding the emphasis eighteenth-century Methodists placed on the possession of the Spirit of adoption). This astonishing action is explained best, in all likelihood, by the close connection between adoption and predestination (see [Eph. 1:4-5](#) especially).

Accordingly, between c.1650-1830 adoption gradually became lost to view. Many individual Puritans wrote pieces on adoption, as [Joel Beeke](#) has recently shown ("Transforming Power and Comfort: The Puritans on Adoption" in *The Faith Once Delivered*, edited by Anthony T. Selvaggio [P&R]), but after the Westminster Assembly the doctrine ceased to occupy the place it enjoys in the theology of Calvin and in the Westminster Standards. Part of the reason for this was that the Westminster commissioners — who produced the first confession of faith to include a chapter on adoption — did little to weave the doctrine's implications throughout them. Thus, instead of working to improve the tradition's reflection of the theological emphases and tone of the New Testament, the subsequent tradition allowed the Fatherhood of God and adoption to fade from the everyday discussion of the theology of Calvinism. In consequence of this, Calvinism came to express the retrospective aspects of the atonement (what we are saved from) at the expense of its prospective aspects (what we are saved to), and the juridical (legal) aspects of the

gospel at the expense of its relational (or specifically familial) elements. Perhaps the clearest single evidence of this change within Calvinism is found in the claim of the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century Southern Presbyterian Robert A. Webb that "Calvin wrote nothing whatsoever on adoption"! (The Reformed Doctrine of Adoption, Eerdmans, 1947). This claim tells us far more of the post-Westminster Assembly development of Calvinism than it does of the theology of Calvin.

A backlash against the lopsidedness of Westminster Calvinism was bound to occur at some point. When it did, it was led by two unlikely rebels: Scotsmen Thomas Erskine of Linlathen (1788-1870) and John McLeod Campbell (1800-72). Whereas Erskine's protests led him eventually into Universalism, Campbell adopted (excuse the pun!) such a novel doctrine of atonement that it became impossible for Evangelicals within the Church of Scotland to take to heart his protest against the Calvinism of his day (at least, that which he experienced in Scotland). Quite the contrary, his contribution to the development of Victorian liberalism meant that his promising emphases on the Fatherhood of God and Christian sonship became linked ever after with a liberal view of theology, and were thus ignored. Even today, conservative Presbyterians, in writing off McLeod Campbell's protest, overlook its kernel of truth; namely his highlighting of the need to balance the retrospective/prospective elements of atonement and the juridical/familial aspects of the gospel.

This fear of Victorian liberalism has, more recently, been supplemented by a fear of Charismatic influences. The Charismatic stress on the relational (especially familial) elements of the gospel makes it difficult for the more suspicious type of mind to embrace what, in actuality, are New Testament themes. Ironically, not all Charismatics perceive themselves the way the Reformed perceive them. I think of leading Charismatic theologian Thomas Smail for instance, who, in his book *The Forgotten Father*, asks whether Charismatics have in fact emphasized the Spirit at the expense of the Father. Well, it's not for me to answer that.

All I am trying to say here is that there are sufficient lessons from church history to suggest that adoption has been neglected, and that it is high time we recovered it. Reformed Christians

have less excuse than anyone else in not participating in this recovery, for no tradition of theology has, to my knowledge, done as much with the doctrine in the Reformation and post-Reformation eras.

Some progress has been made in recent years. We now have available a study of the fortunes of the doctrine of adoption covering the course of the last two millennia, with special reference to the Calvinistic tradition. There are also more widely available the publication of biblical studies across a range of theological traditions, which studies afford us an opportunity to understand better the biblical data. A more mature understanding of this data and its application to the multiple issues surrounding the doctrine will further to no end the task of (re-)integrating adoption into the established content and everyday discussion of the Christian faith.

Why do you believe it is important for the doctrine of adoption to be recovered?

Well, the general answer is that the recovery of adoption would contribute markedly to the completion of the church's theological task. More specifically, it would show Christians of a Reformed persuasion how they can even out the largely unrecognized lopsided features of their theology in a manner reflective of the balance of Scripture, the earlier example of Calvin and, to some degree, the Westminster Standards. Allow me to explain.

First, the recovery of adoption would help us express what we are saved to as much as what we have been saved from. The great Princeton theologian B. B. Warfield summed up this imbalance by reference to what he called "Miserable Sinner Christianity". Now, undoubtedly, we are miserable sinners. That is after all why we come to Christ. But is this the final word on who we are as God's people? Surely not! The NT mentions a number of themes depicting the new standing we have in Christ, one of the richest of which is adoptive sonship. The recovery of this motif would enable us to even out our respective emphases on the retrospective and prospective aspects of the atonement. Stated alternatively, it would help us to be as forthcoming about what we are in Christ as about what we have been in Adam.

This more balanced approach to the expression of the Bible's doctrine of salvation promises dividends for the level of joy among our ranks. Remember, it was the experience of joylessness among McLeod Campbell's parishioners that first spawned his early-nineteenth century protest against Westminster Calvinism — a protest repeated recently along more orthodox lines by Jack Miller (I refer to World Harvest Mission's Sonship Discipleship Course). Whatever we think of these initiatives, they share an important nugget of truth; namely, that the recovery of adoptive sonship is relevant to our reflection of the victory of the gospel. We are, says Paul, hyper-conquerors through Christ who loved us! The apostle's language of adoption helps us express this.

Second, the recovery of adoption would help us prioritize the identities we Christians share in Christ over against other identifying factors that threaten division within the household of God ([Eph. 2:19](#)). We are not predestined (literally pre-horizoned [[Eph. 1:5](#)]) first and foremost to be male or female, Jew or Gentile ([Gal. 3:28](#); [Eph. 2:11-22](#)), or even to be educated or uneducated, or rich or poor, but to be sons of our God. This should be our primary consciousness.

This prioritization has massive pastoral ramifications. I think, for instance, of second-generation ethnic Americans who are confused as to whether their primary identity is American or Chinese, Korean, Polish, Dutch, African, Hispanic or whatever. Christians have a way out of the dilemma. They can think of themselves first and foremost as sons and/or daughters of God. For in his family, rightly understood and outworked, race and color is put in its place. Differences in both are accepted, yet neither can legitimately overshadow the ultimate basis of the unity we possess in Christ.

Note in this regard the three biblical occurrences of the form of address "Abba, Father" ([Mk. 14:36](#); [Rom. 8:15](#); [Gal. 4:6](#)). First, it is used by our Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane, then twice by Paul in connection with adoption. With its combination of Aramaic ("Abba") and Greek ("Father" [patēr]), the prayer indicates the international make-up of God's family. Racial differences remain but cease to be the defining factors of who we are.

Third, the recovery of adoption would balance our sense of individualism with a greater awareness

of the importance of Christian community. In years to come we may look back and conclude that the call for the balancing of the individual and corporate or communal aspects of salvation has been the single most important contribution of the so-called “new perspective” on Paul. What I do not see lasting, however, is N. T. Wright’s redefining of justification in terms of membership of the covenant community. For to obtain this redefinition he has had to overlook the specifics of Paul’s language in [Romans 8](#) and [Galatians 3-4](#), opting to translate *huiothesia* as “sonship” rather than “adoption”. That said, I do not see opponents of the new perspective successfully refuting it until they begin to supplement their repetition of the classic Protestant doctrine of justification with due attention to adoption. This is because adoption, replete with its corporate or communal implications, constitutes a major way the NT balances out the individual and communal aspects of the gospel. Freed lawbreakers may retain, for a short while, a family-like bond; but, in the norm, it is brothers and sisters who will maintain the stronger and longer-lasting connection. The combination of adoption and good parenting is one way the gospel explains the strength of this connection, for it tells of a heavenly Father who not only brings us near to himself, but also near to each other.

So why is there, then, such a deplorable lack of unity in the church? Could it be that the acrimony, sectarianism, and racism is due in part to the fact that we live more like freed convicts than as siblings? While it is true that siblings fall out, there remains typically a strong underlying commitment to each other. If, then, we revised our understanding of the church, regarding it more as a family, would we not witness increased levels of commitment to each other? As things stand, we tend to walk away from each other rather than face the spiritual challenges of reconciliation. Ecclesial and/or institutional politics, which hijack biblical processes, sometimes give us no alternative. In such instances the church ceases to be the place of healing that it ought to be. She has, in fact, aped the world.

Fourth, the recovery of adoption would help us even out our views of God. He is not only our Judge but our Father. The language of Fatherhood, however, has become in the twenty-first century as odious as the thought of God’s justice became to Victorian liberals. While many men are wonderful fathers, the female chauvinism

of the day, the reality of paternal absenteeism and — worst still — of paternal brutality, have combined to bring the notion of fatherhood into disrepute. The recovery of adoption could, I imagine, challenge this significantly.

First we must overcome the cultural objections to the idea of divine paternity. We call God “Father” because this is the language the Spirit has given us in Scripture and by his indwelling in our hearts. As maternal as is the Bible’s depiction of God’s Fatherhood (e.g. Is. 66:13), Scripture never tells us to address God as “Mother”. According to Paul, it is the church that is, from one angle, our mother ([Gal. 4:26](#)). Secondly, the substitution of the language of Fatherhood for Motherhood would solve little. For every heavy-handed father who renders the language of divine paternity psychologically challenging, there is a screeching mother who, given the opportunity, would present the same challenges to the concept of divine maternity. Thirdly, church history teaches us that those with poor or limited experiences of human fatherhood have found the idea of God’s heavenly Fatherhood highly attractive. I think of Calvin whose emphasis on the Fatherhood of God may well have been influenced by his estranged relationship to his earthly father. I think of Robert S. Candlish, leader of the Free Church of Scotland after the death of Thomas Chalmers (1780-1847), whose interest in the Fatherhood of God was, at one level, likely influenced by the early loss of his father. More recently Thomas Smail has stated categorically that his interest in the Fatherhood of God was shaped by the father he never knew. How much more attractive, then, does God’s heavenly Fatherhood become when it is mirrored, albeit palely, by an earthly father? That was John McLeod Campbell’s experience. Mine too.

In short, the recovery of adoption holds out the possibility of a fresh appreciation of the notion of fatherhood. For adoption teaches us of our heavenly Father who, in his motherly fathering, is the perfect pattern of human parenting.

Why is it important to consider Paul’s use of adoption within the larger story of redemption? What role does it play?

Well, a number of things could be said. I would say, first, that the importance of locating adoption (initially) within the larger story of redemption arises from the necessity of combining a high

view of Scripture with a high use of it. We conservatives can be pretty smug about our doctrine of Scripture. We do have a high view of it, but what is the point of this if our use of it is shoddy?

One of the reasons for the disjunction between our view and our use of Scripture is the tendency to submit the Scriptures to what scholar Brevard Childs calls “dogmatic construal”. This construal occurs where we begin self-consciously with an extra-biblical framework and coerce (whether wittingly or unwittingly) the biblical data to conform to it. Now I recognize that we all go to Scripture with preconceived ideas, but once we begin to marshal the scriptural data with a view to their justification we begin to dictate the theology we formulate.

A little personal history may throw some light on how I came to this view.

My research into adoption began in theological college in the early '90s. My NT professor assigned me the task of summarizing a chapter of Herman Ridderbos' volume *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (SPCK, 1977). In preparing my summary of the chapter on adoption (“An outline of an outline,” Professor Boyd called it), I was struck by the difference between Ridderbos' approach and that of the Puritans. First, I could not help but note that adoption had a more certain presence in the theology of Paul than in the Puritans (at least, those I knew of). Secondly, I could not help but observe that Ridderbos's study of the motif took in only what Paul taught. The Puritans, by contrast, convey less interest in Paul's unique usage of *huiiothesia*, and seem indifferent to the need to understand Paul's uses of *huiiothesia* within the distinctive context of the apostle's writings and theology. Thirdly, it became apparent that Ridderbos was concerned to expound Paul on his own terms; that is, within the framework of the history of salvation (*historia salutis*). The Puritans, by contrast, focus more on the *ordo salutis* (that is, on questions relating to the inter-connectedness of justification, regeneration, sanctification and adoption). Fourthly, it came to light (with the help of research into Paul and into Calvin) that adoption cannot be rightly understood without recognizing the redemptive-historical context of Paul's uses of *huiiothesia*. How exciting it was to realize that Paul's five uses of *huiiothesia* could be so ordered — without any despite to relevant matters of

authorship or context — as to form a line or trajectory running from the first things ([Eph. 1:5](#)), through the period of Israel's history ([Rom. 9:4](#)) and the advent of Christ ([Gal. 4:4-6](#); cf. [Rom. 8:15-16](#)), to the last things ([Rom. 8:23](#)). Fifthly, it became obvious that the Puritan conflation of John's new birth model and Paul's adoption model required the flattening out of the contours of Paul's redemptive-historical approach to the doctrine. Sixthly, I deduced that this Puritan practice arose out of the desire to work out systematically (*i.e.*, neatly) the unity of the Bible's message, thus providing an orderly understanding of scriptural doctrine. What was wrong was not the desire for a neat system of theology, but the method of obtaining it. For while the Puritans were correct to say that adoption gives the standing of a son and the new birth his character, they were wrong to arrive at this equation by mixing biblical models (*i.e.*, robust metaphors) without sufficient scriptural warrant. The result in my view is an approach to adoption that can rightly claim a high view of Scripture while displaying an unfortunate use of it.

Secondly, the consideration of adoption within the story of redemption gives us a better understanding of the church. It is often assumed that the church came into existence at Pentecost. In Paul's mind, however, Pentecost marked not the birth of the church but the church's coming of age. I base this claim on [Galatians 3-4](#), where Paul distinguishes between the life of the church under the old and new covenants. Whereas Israel — Yahweh's young son adopted at Sinai with all the rights and privileges of primogeniture — constituted the church in its infancy, the Israel of God — made up of Jewish and Gentile believers — constitutes the church come of age. Under the old covenant God's people could only speak indirectly of him as “Father” (*e.g.* as by use of simile [[Ps. 103:13](#)]), whereas in the new covenant era we address God directly as our “Father”. Under the old covenant God's people were enslaved to the ceremonial law (the schoolmaster, governor, steward [[Gal. 3:23; 4:1-2](#)]), whereas under the new covenant the sons and daughters of God (inclusive of believing Gentiles [former slaves to the rudimentary elements of the world, [Gal. 4:3, 8](#)]) are free: old enough to enjoy the liberty of driving a car — to draw an analogy — but mature enough to pay attention to the rules of the road (the moral law/ten commandments).

Thirdly, by considering adoption within the history of redemption we gain a better understanding of the background of Paul's use of *huiiothesia*. Scholars may differ as to whether Paul's understanding of adoption is based on Greek or Roman forms of adoption, but his use of the term suggests that he took hold of a Hellenistic term (meaning, literally, the "placing of a son") and filled it with lessons taken from the history of the old covenant. This does not mean to say that Paul wrote in isolation from the first-century practices of adoption, but it does mean, so far as I can see, that they were not to the fore in his mind when including mention of *huiiothesia* in his epistles. We need, therefore, to be careful when reading first century practices into Paul's references to adoption. Any allusions perceived must comport with the thrust of the apostle's clear redemptive-historical perspective and with the immediate contexts of his references to *huiiothesia*.

What is the difference between the apostle John's model of entrance into God's family and Paul's? Why do you believe it is important to distinguish them?

Good question! The first thing to say is that these differences are not absolute. Both authors have in mind the same Father. That is to say, the Fatherhood of God is common to the models of new birth and adoption. Both authors make use of the term "children of God" ([Jn. 1:12; 11:52; 1 Jn. 3:1, 2, 10, 5:2; Rom. 8:16; Phil. 2:15](#)). Both authors use the language as part of their chosen metaphorical constructs: John the new birth, and Paul adoption.

Nonetheless, there are sufficient differences between the two models to warrant their disentanglement. This disentanglement is necessary not only for the clear perception of the structure and content of Paul's model, but also of John's.

In John's model, for example, there is no use of *huiiothesia*. The closest he comes to a doctrine of adoption is in his use of *exousia* ("authority" or "right") in [John 1:12](#). But even supposing John makes reference there to adoption, we have no right to assume that there is immediate coherence between John's language and Paul's. Why not? 1. John's reference constitutes a metaphor (a one-time analogy), Paul's constitute a model (capable of conveying a substantial body

of information). (2) John and Paul were coming from different backgrounds and writing for different audiences. (3) The meaning of the Johannine and Pauline terminology is governed not simply by the words used (inclusive of their origin), but by the context of their use. Accordingly, we must understand John's allusion to adoption — if, indeed, that is what it is — within the context of the Johannine writings before making any comparisons or contrasts with Paul's thought.

Second, whereas Paul speaks predominantly of Christians as the "sons of God", John speaks of us chiefly as "children". Paul's approach is governed by the thought that at the heart of the adoption is a union between the natural Son and the adopted sons (n.b. the play on words: *huios* [son] and *huioi* [sons, as in *huiiothesia*]). John's approach is governed by the thought that there is only one Son — the only begotten Son (*huios*) — by contrast with whom we are but "children" (*tekna*). But the term *tekna*, which comes from the root *tiktein* (to bear), also indicates, in distinction from *huiiothesia*, that the filial relationship is constituted by birth. The idea of birth connotes the idea of regeneration and conveys chiefly the idea of similarity of nature.

Yet, I stress, these differences are not absolute. Sometimes Paul describes God's people as children (*tekna* [[Rom. 8:16, 17, 21; 9:8](#)]), and sometimes John implies the status of the children of God ([1 Jn. 3:1](#)). Similarities such as these do not negate, however, the case for desisting from the conflation of the two images. For these similarities are explicable within the confines of the thought/models of the respective authors.

There are a number of plausible reasons for Paul's use of the term *tekna*: 1. To underline the theological rather than sexist motivation behind his connection of the "Son" and the "sons". Note in this regard Paul's reference to the daughters of God ([2 Cor. 6:18](#)) and his use of *tekna*. 2. To underline the fact that, although, in the NT era, the sons of God are of age, they nevertheless remain children. Think about that. Our Father in heaven is the Ancient of Days, who neither ages nor suffers loss of vitality. Accordingly, there occurs within his family no role reversal, for at no point does he become dependant on his sons and daughters. No matter how mature believers are in the new covenant era, they always remain but children, and relate to God as such.

Likewise, there is a very simple reason why John would refer to the status of the children of God. I refer to the inevitability of his implication of their status when speaking of their new natures. The children of God have new natures precisely because they have been born (again) into the standing of children within the Kingdom of God. Please don't think of all this as esoteric hair-splitting. The careful analysis of the wording of Scripture comports with a verbal and plenary understanding of its inspiration, and is essential for the accurate understanding not only of the distinctive structures of each model, but of the doctrines they convey (chiefly union with Christ and regeneration). This sort of analysis also paves the way for a fresh approach to the systematizing of biblical truth. Naturally, in speaking holistically of the Christian faith and of the doctrine of salvation in particular, there is need to connect the doctrines of Scripture. Yet the interconnectedness of the biblical doctrines must be established on Scripture's own terms; by which I refer to the need to desist from the mixing of the models of Scripture unless they are clearly mixed within given contexts of Scripture. In making this point, I realize its far-reaching implications for the discipline of systematic theology. We must not allow, however, a fear of methodological adjustment to blind us to the specifics of the biblical data.

What difference should the doctrine of adoption make in a Christian's spiritual life on a daily basis?

As stated earlier, adoption affords us the opportunity for a renewed appreciation of the Fatherhood of God, the life to which in Christ we have been redeemed and adopted, a new sense of filial identity and of the new household into which we've been introduced by grace. These factors can significantly impact our spiritual outlook. But there are other lessons too, which can be applied more personally.

First, the son or daughter of God is a person who is free. We no longer need to justify ourselves. Rather, we look to our elder brother, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, in his life, kept the law at every place we break it. Does this mean that we are free to live lawless lives? No! For the freedom we have in Christ is a liberty to keep God's law. We keep the law, however, not as a way of salvation but as an expression of how thankful we are for the grace we've received in the gospel. That said, the

law does not cover all the affairs of life. There are what we call "things indifferent" which we have the freedom to decide one way and then sometimes another.

The first sphere in which this new liberty manifests itself is prayer. When we come to faith in Christ and have placed on our lips by the Spirit the word "Father", we cry out to God with what Ridderbos calls a "cry of liberation". This cry is an essential evidence of the Spirit of adoption.

Implied in this cry (Paul uses the verb *krazō*) is not only the greater boldness, confidence and assurance of the church in general in the new covenant era, but also the brand new boldness, confidence and assurance each person experiences on entrance into the household of God. No longer do we pray unto God in some estranged manner. Rather, we pray to him as "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant [us], according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man" ([Eph. 3:14b-16](#) [NKJV]).

Also to the fore in talk of adoptive sonship is God's rich providence. While he provides for all in a general sense, God is especially committed to providing for his family. The essential elements of his providence are preservation and protection. Interestingly, Calvin understood the Lord's Supper to be a most graphic portrayal of God's paternal providence. While we might question some of what he says of the Lord's Supper (some of his language is positively cannibalistic), nonetheless his depiction of it as a banquet laid on by God the Father for his sons and daughters captures the imagination. By this banquet the Father nourishes his children, the language of which refers to the believer's communion with Christ (interestingly, it is also found in the Westminster Standards). This communion is possible not because Christ descends from heaven — thus becoming present in, with, or under the bread and wine (the Lutheran view) — but by our ascent to heaven. This ascent occurs when we participate in the sacrament by faith. If Calvin is correct in this, the Lord's Supper is more than a memorial; it is a real means of grace.

Then there's obedience. The sons and daughters of God have responsibilities as well as privileges. Our chief responsibility is obedience to the will of

God. This obedience shows itself in prayer and in adherence to the Ten Commandments. True obedience to our Father is born of filial gratitude. Such gratitude checks a licentious abuse of filial freedom on the one hand and a legalistic approach to obedience on the other. It resonates, however, with the example of Christ, who lived his earthly life in constant reference to his Father. His example of obedience helps us to focus aright; that is, not so much on the law as on the Christ who daily expressed his love for his Father. In such an atmosphere the commands of God become a delight, and are received as opportunities to honor our Father and to aid our brethren.

Important to note in all this is the thought that, as great as are our filial privileges, our Father stops short of spoiling us. By calling us to live lives of self-denial and of cross-bearing, he ensures that our blessings beautify us rather than corrupt us. After all, spoiled children reflect poorly on their parents! It is the knowledge that our Father loves us enough not to spoil us that helps us receive his chastening patiently, and to die to self. By doing so, we gradually conform to the image of Jesus, the Father's only "natural born" Son.

Finally, adoption speaks of hope. This hope Paul depicts by means of the word "inheritance" ([Rom. 8:17f.](#)). Not only has God given his family members a promise of the inheritance, in granting us his Spirit he has also given us a downpayment on it ([Eph. 1:13-14](#)). We come by the inheritance not because of what we do, but because of who we are in Christ. The inheritance is, then, a free gift of the grace of adoption. This we shall come into in its fullness on the day of redemption ("the adoption" [[Rom. 8:23](#)]). From that day on we shall experience the consummation of God's saving purposes, and shall do so as much in our bodies as in our souls.

Nothing indicates the grace of our Father more than the realization that he shares with us the inheritance regardless of the fact he never dies! It is the knowledge of this inheritance, coupled with the experience of the other more immediate privileges of adoptive sonship, which helps us to ride out the challenges of life, to die to self, and to take up our crosses. For the inheritance reveals to us most powerfully the gracious character of the gospel, from beginning to end; a grace it ought to be said that issues in future glory: God's glory revealed in us ([Rom. 8:18](#)) and

manifest in the perfect liberty of life on the new earth. And to think that this is what the Father envisioned for us way back in eternity past when pre-horizoning us to adoption!

Most people who read this blog have adopted children, are considering adopting a child, or are just interested in adoption. What implications might the doctrine of adoption have for couples who have adopted or are interested in adopting a child?

Well, there is one obvious fact. God approves of adoption. I see no evidence to conclude that it is OK for God to adopt, but not for us. It seems unlikely to me that God would take hold of a human practice he doesn't approve of in order to teach us of what he has done for us in Christ. I rather think that in the Scriptures (specifically in the writings of Paul) God is telling us that social human practices of adoption mirror, albeit faintly, what God has been working out for his people prior to any human conception of adoption.

In making this point I am not saying that a man and wife from whom God has withheld children are obliged to adopt. I don't think they are. They may legitimately conclude that if God has withheld from them natural-born children then perhaps it is not his will for them to have children at all. I think of friends of mine who came to this conclusion, but have since gone on to invest their lives in consecutive generations of students. Eternity will tell how influential they have been in the formation of many an up-and-coming young adult.

All the same, I do believe that a couple is free to adopt, if, having sought God's counsel, they believe they are being called to do so. The grace of adoption reminds us that our heavenly Father did not adopt because he had to, but because he desired to; and he did so notwithstanding the fact that he already had a Son with whom he enjoyed perfect and reciprocated fellowship. Given this, it is hard to conclude anything other than that God has given couples a freedom to decide this issue. I may go further. If it is legitimate to describe God as the original single parent (albeit acknowledging that his Fatherhood embraces the benefits of motherhood as well), then it also seems legitimate to say that it is permissible for singles to adopt. Surely one parent is better than none, which is what you have when children are adopted from orphanages. (I think of Zambia, for

instance, which, reputedly, has 2 million orphans in a population of 10 million). The decisive factor is not how many parents an adopted child has, but whether he, she or they can provide what is required for the child's preservation and protection. So long as they can, they reflect the good providence of God our Father.

Another connection we can draw between Paul's doctrine and social practices of adoption today is the element of choice or election. Michael Reagan brought this out powerfully at his father's funeral: "I am Michael Reagan, the adopted son of Ronald Reagan. The one he chose". There is a difference, however, between God's choice and that of adopting parents. The choice at work in God's adoption arises from nothing other than the will of his grace. There is nothing in us that procures his choice of us.

Adopting parents may also learn from the close biblical connection between adoption and the notion of covenant. It is interesting that, in his commentaries, Calvin does not refer profusely to the adoption motif until he expounds the Abrahamic covenant ([Gen. 12 ff.](#)). So far as Paul's reading of old covenant history is concerned, however, adoption does not become a factor in redemption until the Mosaic era (i.e. the adoption at Sinai of Israel as Yahweh's young son [the underlying teaching of [Rom. 9:4](#)]). All the same, the closeness of the connection between the themes of adoption and of covenant is obvious. In adoption God expresses his commitment to his people as much as he does when entering into covenant with them. For all the waywardness and ingratitude of his son (Israel [OT])/his sons (Jewish and Gentile believers [NT]), God remains faithful. Faithful, because he is the father of his people, whom he loves steadfastly and interminably. The same ought to be true of adopting parents. They may face the pain of ingratitude and/or the insults of rebellion, but they have committed themselves to the son(s) and/or daughter(s) they have adopted. Adopted children share an equal footing in the family with any that are natural-born, and must be treated as such. They must also serve as co-workers with the rest of the household for the advancement of the health, development and usefulness of the family, just as our heavenly Father has made us, his adopted sons and daughters, co-workers with Jesus Christ for the advancement of the family of God.

Finally, God's adoptive grace reminds adopting parents to fulfill their roles in a gospel-centered manner. While the gospel acknowledges the circumstances from which we've been adopted, it takes us beyond them. It does not keep us looking at them forevermore. Adopting parents may differ as to how much they reveal of the circumstances from which their child was taken, but good adopting parents will, in multiple ways, communicate to their adopted son/daughter that what is most important is what they are now. They are no longer unwanted children or foreign orphans, but beloved children, to whom their adoptive parents are utterly committed.

Well, I could go on, but I prefer to stop short of implying there is a complete transfer of ideas between God's action in adoption and the social practices of our day. Clearly, there are discontinuities. For instance, it is not typical today to adopt a son from out of slavery. While some are adopted out of odious circumstances, redemption is not the necessary precursor to adoption that it is in Paul's thought. Nor is it typical nowadays to adopt a grown up son (see [Gal. 3:23-4:7](#)). What is more, there isn't such a stress today on the necessity of continuing the family name. If I have understood the situation aright, most couples adopt for reasons of fulfillment (having a child) or philanthropy (giving a child a better life). These are both legitimate reasons, worthy reasons even, and can reflect in some pale fashion (with qualification) what God has done for us in Christ. They reflect less, however, the motivation(s) behind Greco-Roman forms of adoption. But, then, the degree and manner to which Paul includes in his adoption model allusions to first-century practices is most uncertain. Evidently, the study and reflection must continue. Despite the story told by the theological history of adoption, I believe it will. For God's Spirit seems, currently, to be bringing the doctrine to our attention from a number of different angles. Who knows, some day we may finally come to see that he is calling us to recover it.