

Review: The Message of Sonship (Trevor Burke, 2011)

IVP (UK) Bible Speaks Today: Bible Themes.

Sonship is the saving centre of Jesus' message and a central Biblical theme. A Christian is adopted into God's family. This is Trevor Burke's subject in *Sonship*, the latest book in the Bible Speaks Today Thematic series. Burke argues that no full length book on this subject has been written, though he cites many sources who have explored it to some extent. This book and more books like it are needed for the church today.

Burke explores the Biblical metaphor of Sonship showing that Christianity is fundamentally relational, because God is *"relentlessly relational"* (p30). Burke's language drips off the tongue, he clearly enjoys his subject and his work reads like that of a preacher. Sonship, Salvation, Suffering and the Spirit are four intertwined themes of Scripture. This is traced along a line from Adam to Israel, to David to Christ and to Christians, highlighting the major points of this theme in Exodus, Deuteronomy, 2 Samuel 7, Hosea & Isaiah and then into the New Testament.

We're shown how sonship is central to salvation, and that it is intertwined with suffering, throughout the Scriptures. We suffer but so does the Father. P66: *"God as parent is also caught up in the drama of adversity... God suffers because, with and for his people... like a long-suffering parent."* While covenant can be broken *"you cannot stop being a son to your father."*

I will return endlessly to read Burke on Hosea 11. Here's a taste. We see that Israel was *"loved, called, taught and healed: what more could child-Israel want or need."* This child is loved by a passionate parent: *"If heartache could be placed on a scale of suffering, we might put the rebuff of a stranger at the bottom... but at the very top must surely be the stinging jilting pain of a parent-child estrangement alongside the deep wound of betrayal in marriage... the deeper the love the deeper the pain"* (p89). Our father has *"wounded majesty, wounded love"* (p90). Our love for God (p212) is a fruit of his love for us and not a root so that *"you may conclude with absolute certainty that God loves you if you love God"* (Spurgeon) and John Owen: *"the greatest unkindness you can do to [the Father] is not to believe that he loves you"* (p212). Stop and re-read those quotes, repeatedly.

Turning to the New Testament *Sonship* considers Jesus the Son. Having shown how sonship, salvation and suffering go together we're shown how sonship is intertwined with the Spirit (p107). Jesus sits at the centre of the biblical narrative of sonship where his filial relationship to his Father is identified, tested and confirmed. Any Biblical theology must be thoroughly Christ-focused and this book is.

In considering John's gospel Burke seeks to emphasize the distinction between Jesus' Sonship and ours. He cited Jesus word from John 20:17 speaking of *"my Father, and your Father"* to highlight not our unity with Jesus in sonship, but our distinction from him. Certainly he is the true son and we are adopted, but is our resultant sonship not more the same than different? I found this slightly frustrating. There is distinction but surely much unity? Could more have been said about our prayer life, that we can pray Jesus' prayers to his Father, and even step inside his prayer life? I found the absence of reference to the parable of the prodigal sons a little strange, though this has been explored at great length by many, many writers!

Burke uses a number of moving stories and helpful illustrations, a particularly excellent story about the extent of a Father's love for his Son on p128, and another considering the life of William Cowper on p139. You'll need to read them to appreciate them, but they're wonderful. Burke suggests in his introduction that we should read the book through rather than dipping in, and I commend that approach – so you'll have to wait until you reach those pages to enjoy the stories.

Burke states: *“adoption is first and foremost a Trinitarian action where God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit work together in order to bring us into the household.”* (p141). Considering each person of the Trinity he suggests we *“have underplayed the work of the Spirit in adoption”* and reminds us that the Spirit is not just God’s empowering presence but *“God’s personal presence”* (p147). A wonderful observation.

In the chapter on Ephesians we see how we have become children of God. Burke cites Mark Stibbe’s book *From Orphans to Heirs* speaking of *“adopting grace”* and speaking of *‘the warmth and joy with which the Father executed this plan in making us his adopted children’* for *“it pleased him to enfold us in the eternal family of faith. It brought him joy and thrilled his heart.”* (p164-5).

The final note of the book is an invitation to *“bask in the presence of the Father and Son”* (p230) for it is Sonship in Revelation 21:7 that is the end of salvation! What a great hope!

I really enjoyed reading this book. It’s an important book on a very important subject. I rate it as one of the best in the BST Thematic series, alongside Tim Chester’s volume on Prayer.

I really wanted it to continue rather than end. And that probably leads me to my minor frustrations with the book. I read longing for more lengthy application, a restriction probably due to the BST Thematic format. In particular I wanted to see more about what living as a son means. We’re shown that it has to do with carrying moral obligations, along with some material on Spirit-led mortification. I wanted to see more of this, and more exploration of what a sonly life would look like. I’d love to have seen more application drawn from Jesus own example as a son, contrasted with the slavery we knew before our adoption. I love to see how this works out into mission as sons. I also would love to have seen more of the present reality of sonship. Much is said of our future inheritance, but what of today? What of enjoying the intimacy of being loved by the Father as sons that is touched on when Stibbe, Owen and Spurgeon are cited? I’d love to read Burke at more length on this.

Those involved in Together for Adoption would surely look to see some material on adoption of children today, and on embodying our gospel-sonship in the family. No book can do everything.

The book is nonetheless a warm-hearted and engaging and accessible exploration of a theme that we need to hear much more of today. I particularly appreciated the clarity of the Introduction and the material on Hosea. Sonship gives a helpful taster of this vital subject that would lead the reader into much further study and application of this wonderful reality.

Dave Bish

Team Leader with the Universities & Colleges Christian Fellowship in the UK, blogger at <http://thebluefish.org>