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‘The First Title of the Spirit’: Adoption in Calvin’s Soteriology

A second article on adoption from a historical-theological angle usefully complements Mr Burke’s biblical study. The author is pastor of All Saints Reformed Presbyterian Church, Richmond, Va.

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First, he is called the Spirit of adoption, because he is the witness to us of the free benevolence of God with which God has embraced us in his only-begotten Son to become a Father to us¹

The Spirit has not been given to harass us with fear or torment us with anxiety, but rather to allay our disquiet, to bring our minds to a state of tranquility, and to stir us up to call on God with confidence and freedom.²

The adoption of believers is at the heart of John Calvin’s understanding of salvation. Nevertheless, the third book of his *Institutes*, where Calvin treats ‘The Way in Which We Receive the Grace of Christ; What Benefits Come to Us from It, and What Effects Follow,’ has no chapter on adoption. This may have contributed to the strange silence on the subject in the literature on Calvin. Major theologies of Calvin offer no chapter on adoption. This is so in the general literature such as W. Niesel’s *The Theology of Calvin*,³ and F. Wendel’s *Calvin, The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*.⁴ It is true even in the practical treatments of Calvin’s doctrine of the Christian life by R. S. Wallace and J. Leith.⁵ This is a major omission.⁶ It is more than fair for Sinclair Ferguson to write ‘He does not treat sonship as a separate locus of theology precisely because it under-

1 All quotations from the *Institutes* are from the translation by Ford L. Battles, J. T. McNeill (ed.), (*Library of Christian Classics*, 20-21; Philadelphia, 1960 [1977]). This is from III.1.3.

2 John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul The Apostle to the Romans and the Thessalonians*, Ross Mackenzie, Translator, David W. Torrance, Thomas F. Torrance, Eds., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960 [1979]) Rom. 8:15, 169-70. All references to his New Testament commentaries will be to this edition. Further references will be abbreviated as Comm., followed by the scripture reference.

3 Philadelphia, 1956.

4 Translation, New York, 1963 [Durham, N.C., 1987].

5 See Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Edinburgh, 1959 [Tyler Texas, 1982]), and Leith, *John Calvin’s Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Louisville, KY, 1989).

girds everything he writes.⁷ A study of Book III and of Calvin's wider theology bring this to light. A quick count of the index to the Battles translation of the *Institutes* shows that Calvin referred to Rom. 8:14-33, where the Apostle Paul deals with the Spirit and privileges of adoption, in no fewer than fifty one sections of Book III! References to 'the adoption of sons' are spread throughout the *Institutes*. Indeed, so comprehensive a theme is it, that it forms a basis for his entire theology of redemption: in embryo in election, in his development of the history of redemption, and in his treatment of Christian experience. This essay will focus on how Calvin treats the doctrine of adoption in the wider context of his theology.

I. Adoption in theology, christology and soteriology

Calvin addresses the question of the knowledge of God the Creator as he begins the *Institutes*. Piety is essential to true knowledge. Piety is characterized by trust and fear: 'Because it acknowledges him as Lord and Father, the pious mind also deems it meet and right to observe his authority in all things, reverence his majesty, take care to advance his glory. . . .'⁸ The right knowledge of God begins with knowledge of Him as Father. This is not to say that all people know God so, or that this knowledge of God is available through natural revelation, rich though that is with evidence of his fatherly care. Rather, it comes about by faith in Christ.

Therefore, since we have fallen from life into death, the whole knowledge of God the Creator that we have discussed would be useless unless faith also followed, setting forth for us God our Father in Christ. . . . Even if God wills to manifest his fatherly favor to us in many ways, yet we cannot by contemplating the universe infer that he is Father. . . . Contemplating it, we ought in wisdom to have known God. But because we have profited so little by it, he calls us to faith in Christ.⁹

What interests us is the fact that right knowledge of God, the goal to which God would lead us, is knowledge of God as our Father.¹⁰ The very gospel is the self-revelation of God to us as Father. At the outset

6 A recent exception is B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude, The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993).

7 Sinclair B. Ferguson, 'The Reformed Doctrine of Sonship', in *Pulpit and People, Essays in Honour of William Still*, Nigel M. DeS. Cameron and Sinclair B. Ferguson, Eds. (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1986) 81-86. This essay argues that Calvin's doctrine of adoption fully meets the tests offered there as an organizing principle of the doctrine of salvation.

8 I.2.2.

9 II.6.1.

10 Cf. III.6.3.

of his presentation of the Christian faith, Calvin teaches that the most basic knowledge of God must be knowledge of him as Father.

Book II describes the knowledge of God the Redeemer. What is the rationale of redemption? It is to make us children of God. Adoption is God's purpose for the incarnation of the Son, the second Person of the Trinity:

... what the Mediator was to accomplish was no common thing. His task was so to restore us to God's grace as to make of the children of men, children of God. ... Who could have done this had not the self-same Son of God become the Son of man, and had not he so taken what was ours as to impart what was his to us, and to make what was his by nature ours by grace? There, relying on this pledge, we trust that we are sons of God, for God's natural Son fashioned for himself a body from our body, flesh from our flesh, bones from our bones, that he might be one with us. ... The only Son of God adopted us as his brothers.¹¹

Calvin continues Book II by confronting Christological heresies. Describing the union of the two natures in Christ's Person, he must prove that it is the eternal Son who was enfleshed. Adoption was only completely clear after the Incarnation.¹² Calvin summarizes the relation of Christ's eternal Sonship to our adoption in the phrase, 'he possesses by nature what we receive as a gift.'¹³

In the polemic against Nestorianism, Calvin again posits that, 'Christ made us sons of God with him by virtue of a bond of brotherhood.'¹⁴ Michael Servetus argued that Christ's sonship was purely metaphorical, because before the incarnation, he 'is nowhere called Son of God, except figuratively.'¹⁵ Calvin vigorously maintains that God has eternally been Father to the Son, whom he eternally begets. Yet in this discussion of a dangerous Christological adoptionism, Calvin is eager to assert the believer's adoption. In other words, in the most controversial context, where we might suppose *our* adoption to be rightly subordinated to the clarity of Christ's eternal Sonship, Calvin again maintains it at the center of his statement.

Not only are Father and Son involved in providing the believer's adoption, but Calvin identifies 'The Spirit of adoption' as the 'first title of the Spirit.'¹⁶ We shall consider his work particularly, below.

In the discussion of soteriology, again we find the concept of sonship central in Calvin's thinking. Though Calvin did not organize the

11 II.12.2.

12 II.14.5.

13 II.14.6.

14 II.14.7.

15 This is Calvin's account of Servetus, *Ibid.*

16 III.1.3, noted by Ferguson.

17 See Niesel, *Theology* 159-60 for an excellent treatment.

Institutes according to what later Reformed theology developed as the *ordo salutis*, if we look at Calvin from that perspective, we see that adoption underlies major steps in that order.

Much has been made of the change of location of the doctrine of election from the earliest to the last edition of the *Institutes*.¹⁷ It is quite clear that Calvin's intention was to use the biblical teaching on election as Scripture itself does: in the service of assurance for believers. Election was dangerous and only a snare when considered abstractly. But if for the sake of the analysis of Calvin's own thinking, we think of it first, it is fascinating to notice that Calvin repeatedly refers to election as God's *adoption* of the believer. This is not just the slip of a pen: Calvin repeats it often.¹⁸

This fact accords perfectly with the Reformer's desire to employ election as a foundation and stay of faith. Election is not a matter of foreseen faith, but pure grace to the children of Adam. For example, in expounding Eph. 1:4-5, 'he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ. . .,' Calvin writes, 'Let this reason, then, prevail among believers: we were adopted in Christ into the eternal inheritance, because in ourselves we were not capable of such great excellence.'¹⁹ Again, expounding Jn. 6:39-40, 'And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that every one who looks to the Son, and believes in him, shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day,' Calvin writes, 'Now it is certain that faith is a singular pledge of the Father's love, reserved for the sons whom he has adopted.'²⁰

But is this correct? In Eph. 1:5 Paul refers to election not as consisting of adoption, but to adoption as the *result* of election. The answer for Calvin seems to be that he sees the election of the believer only as 'in Christ.' In other words, Christ is the Son in whom we are adopted as sons. The believer's election is seen only in his looking to Christ. Since he is God's beloved Son, we may see our election and God's love for us only by looking to Christ in faith. This is Calvin's definitive statement on the subject:

Now what is the purpose of election but that we, adopted as sons by our Heavenly Father, may obtain salvation and immortality by his favor? No matter how much you toss it about and mull it over, you will discover that its final bounds still extend no farther. Accordingly, those whom God has

18 III.22.1,2, 7,10; III.24.4,5; also his *Sermons on Ephesians*, (Reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973) 35-37.

19 III.22.1.

20 III.22.10.

adopted as his sons are said to have been chosen not in themselves, but in his Christ [Eph. 1:4]; for unless he could love them in him, he could not honor them with the inheritance of his Kingdom if they had not previously become partakers of him. But if we have been chosen in him, we shall not find assurance of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we conceive him as severed from his Son. Christ then, is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election. For since it is into his body the Father has destined those to be engrafted whom he has willed from eternity to be his own, that he may hold as sons all whom he acknowledges to be among his members, we have a sufficiently clear and firm testimony that we have been inscribed in the book of life [Cf. Rev. 21:7] if we are in communion with Christ.²¹

There is a world of biblical and pastoral wisdom in this statement. Pastorally, he directs the faithful to Christ, who did not achieve the benefits the Father gave him for himself, but for us. Christ is the focus of election; this protects us from speculation. We will consider Calvin's profound insight into biblical-theology below. But having said this, Calvin's reasoning does not appear sound for collapsing adoption and election. The two are correlative, to be sure, but scripture presents election in Christ as 'to the adoption of sons' (Eph. 1:5).

Calvin also sees adoption as both preceding and following election. In Rom. 8:29, 'For those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers,' Calvin takes the predestination to be adoption.

The foreknowledge of God here mentioned by Paul is not mere prescience, as some inexperienced people foolishly imagine, but adoption, by which He has always distinguished His children from the reprobate.²²

As he explains the various New Testament epistles, Calvin finds the language of adoption used also of effectual calling. Commenting on Jas. 1:18, 'He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created,' he writes,

Scripture teaches us (Eph. 1:4-5) that we were formerly adopted by God before we were born. James goes some degree farther, showing that we hold the right of adoption because God also freely calls us.²³

What about other divine acts of the *ordo*? Does Calvin describe them in terms of adoption? There is some evidence for saying so. Nigel Westhead notes that Calvin does 'mix the soteriological metaphors of justification with regeneration, reconciliation, and

21 III.24.5.

22 *Ibid.* Compare John Murray's paraphrase, 'whom he knew from eternity with distinguishing affection and delight', *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, 1959) I:317.

23 *Comm.* Jas. 1:18.

sanctification,' and that 'the impression is created that adoption and justification would hardly be separable in his mind.'²⁴ Does Calvin *subordinate* adoption to justification, as later Reformed theology did?²⁵ Westhead leaves this an open question. On balance it appears proper to say that for Calvin, adoption is too fundamental a category to be subordinated to justification. His thorough and specific treatment of justification in contrast with that of adoption arose from the context of controversy with Rome over justification.

II. Adoption in redemptive history

How does Calvin treat the theme of adoption in terms of redemptive history? The concept continues to permeate his thinking. He touches only briefly upon the idea of Adam as God's son by creation. Sonship is not included in the image of God for Calvin. In his commentary on Heb. 2:5 however, 'It is not to angels he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking,' he argues that man's sin-forfeited dominion over creation is restored in Christ.²⁶ So some of the constitutive ideas of sonship are there, if the vocabulary is not. Taking his cue from the emphasis of Scripture on the redemptive character of sonship, Calvin does not *emphasize* Adam's created sonship.²⁷ Likewise Calvin is willing to call all the children of men God's 'sons' only in a qualified sense. Sin has attenuated the image of God: 'our sin is just cause for his not regarding or recognizing us as his sons.'²⁸ Calvin's larger treatment of adoption comes in his treatment of the redemptive covenants.

Following Paul, Calvin expresses the difference between the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant in terms of the adoption of sons. Broadly speaking, Calvin contrasts the two covenants. The difference between Old and New, or the 'Law and the Gospel', is the believer's confidence of his adoption. Commenting on Gal. 4:5 'that we might receive the full rights of sons,' Calvin writes that since Christ has 'become a curse for us,' (Gal. 3:13), adoption means that 'we should not be borne down by an unending bondage, which would agonize

24 'Adoption in the Thought of John Calvin', *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 13:102-115 (Autumn 1995) 112.

25 As noted by Ferguson, 'Reformed Doctrine' 83.

26 Wallace, *Calvin's* 131-32. Westhead makes what appears to be a gratuitous assumption, that 'Even the prelapsarian relationship of humanity to God is only "in a certain sense" to be construed in terms of sonship. . .', 'John Calvin's' 103. In his comments on Ex. 4:22, Calvin is referring to fallen humanity.

27 *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, Calvin Translation Society, (Edinburgh, 1843 [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 1979]) Gn. 5:1-3.

28 Cited by Westhead, 'Calvin's' 103.

our consciences with the fear of death.²⁹ Adoption under the New Covenant is primarily a matter of a free conscience. Rom. 8:15 has in view the experience of bondage under the law, in contrast with the Spirit of sonship. Heb. 12:18-22, likewise, shows the experience of the New Covenant believer diverging from that of the Sinai generation, 'where nothing is heard or seen that does not strike minds with terror. . . .' Gal. 4:22-31 teaches, 'the Old Testament struck consciences with fear and trembling, but by benefit of the New, they are released into joy. The Old held consciences bound by the yoke of bondage; the New by its spirit of liberality emancipates them into freedom.'

Lest he be misunderstood, Calvin qualifies that Old Testament saints did have the Spirit of faith. They were believers, adopted sons; but the full light of their adoption had not dawned. Commenting on Rom. 8:15, Calvin writes,

We are not, however, to infer from this either that no one was endowed with the Spirit of adoption before the coming of Christ, or that all who received the law were slaves and not sons. Paul compares the ministry of the law with the dispensation of the Gospel, rather than persons with persons. I admit that believers are here warned how much more liberally God has now dealt with them than He did formerly with the fathers under the Old Testament. He regards, however, the outward dispensation, and in this respect alone we excel them, for the faith of Abraham, Moses, and David, was more excellent than ours. Yet in so far as God kept them under a 'schoolmaster,' they had not yet attained the liberty which has been disclosed to us.³⁰

As we analyze the nature of what might be called 'covenant-adoption,' we will see that Calvin's distinction between 'the ministry of the law' and 'persons' is important. Old Testament saints' spiritual joy arose not from the Law, but from the promises which predated it. The joy of the gospel was overlaid with bondage from the Law. Calvin does not establish an absolute antithesis between Sinai and Zion. Basically, they are one covenant. Calvin is insistent that God's promises always referred to eternal life. But the ceremonial requirements and punishments of the Old largely smothered the joy of the gospel.

Moreover, Calvin refers to the covenants *themselves* as 'adoption.' Referring to Paul, he writes, 'Consequently he was sometimes compelled to take the bare law, in a narrow sense, even though *it was otherwise clothed in the covenant of free adoption.*'³¹ No phrase could better express Calvin's grounding of the Law in God's covenant of grace. Commenting on Rom. 9:4, '. . . theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs

29 II.7.15.

30 *Comm.* Rom. 8:15.

31 I. John Hesselink, 'Luther and Calvin on Law and Gospel in Their Galatians Commentaries', *Reformed Review* 37/2 (1984) 82 n.78.

the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises,' Calvin understands Paul to refer to Ex. 4:22-23, 'This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you 'let my son go, that he may worship me.' Paul was warning the Gentile Romans against pride; he wanted them to understand that the gospel flowed to them from natural Israel and show them that he still had a purpose for their good.

... their perfidy had not rendered the faithfulness of God void, not only because He preserved for Himself some seed as a remnant from the whole multitude, but also because the name of a church still continued among them by the right of inheritance. . . for the Lord had adopted them as his children. . . By these expressions he intends not only to commend his indulgence towards Israel, but rather to display the power of adoption, in which the promise of the heavenly inheritance is contained.³²

Membership in the covenant community, though in unbelief, Calvin calls 'adoption'. Here it is important to note that Calvin uses the twin concepts of 'adoption' and 'inheritance', which always stand together for him. Adoption is for inheritance.

How can he simultaneously use the language of adoption for individual election to salvation, the calling of the Spirit, and the covenant community of unbelieving Israel? Does he not acknowledge their unbelief and apostasy? He is not inconsistent because he is following the language of Scripture. But lest we think of a strange 'dual-covenant' arrangement, wherein Israel is separated from the church, we must look more closely.

In Calvin's exposition of the Abrahamic Covenant, he sorts out the problem, commenting on Gen. 17:7, 'I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be a God to you and to your descendants after you.' Calvin states the question and its solution:

... God made his covenant with those sons of Abraham who were naturally to be born of him. If any one object, that this opinion by no means agrees with the former, in which we said that they are reckoned the children of Abraham, who being by faith ingrafted into his body, form one family; the difference is easily reconciled, by laying down certain *distinct degrees* of adoption. . .³³

By inclusion of the natural children of Abraham, God has distinguished Israel from the other nations of the world, which still wander the earth as exiles from Eden. This was a 'gratuitous adoption' of all natural Israel. It came by promise and grace, not nature. All Israelites were therefore 'sons of God and heirs of eternal life.' This is what

32 *Comm. Rom.* 9:4.

33 *Comm. Gn.* 17:7, emphasis added.

Paul meant by 'Jews by nature' in Gal. 2:15. But what Calvin means, following Paul, is that they were beneficiaries of the promise of God, not in the sense of God's 'efficacious calling,' but 'that outward word, by which God conferred his favor as well upon the reprobate as upon the elect. . . .'³⁴ The promise 'by which God adopted them all as children' was common to all, and salvation was *offered* to all in it.

Here we need to notice that it is not *two* words, or promises, by which God calls his children to himself, but *one*.

Since the whole body of the people is gathered together into the fold of God, by one and the same voice, all without exception are, in this respect, accounted children. . . but in the innermost sanctuary of God, none others are reckoned the sons of God, but they in whom the promise is ratified by faith.³⁵

This is the product of God's hidden election. There is but one word, but it functions to different ends within the covenant community, according to God's hidden plan. Nevertheless that community is yet visibly one. The distinction of elect and reprobate is not clear unless revealed by God.

This accords with Calvin's terminology we noted above: between 'the ministry of the law,' or the Sinai Covenant, and 'persons.' While the 'degrees of adoption' language is used of the Abrahamic Covenant, not Sinai, the idea of the outward ministry of the promise, and of adoption, are the same in his treatment of both. This is what we referred to as 'covenant-adoption.'

The program of the degrees of adoption continued to function among natural Israel, according to Calvin, until the coming of Christ. He disrupted it, by grafting the Gentiles into the church (Eph. 2:14), in place of unbelieving Israel. They too, now, are subjects of the promise, and of adoption, who 'before had been strangers, began to be called sons.'³⁶

Calvin follows the same principles in interpreting the adoption of Israel in Ex. 4:22-23:

. . . the holy offspring of Abraham are here compared with the nations who at that time were still heathen, and. . . in this respect are called his first-born, because they are pre-eminent in dignity. . .³⁷

Again, Calvin treats this 'covenant-adoption' as he does election: one must assure his adoption by faith in Christ.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Ibid.*

37 *Comm. Ex. 4:22-3, Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses, Arranged in the Form of A Harmony* (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker 1979], 1:103-4.

... still we must come to Christ, the only head, in order that the adoption should be sure. For we must hold fast to that statement of St. Paul, that the blessing of Abraham was not promised to his seeds, but to his seed; because not all that sprang from his flesh are accounted to be children, but those that were called, as Isaac, Ishmael being rejected, and as Jacob, Esau being passed by. But Christ is the root of our calling. Therefore, what in Hosea is spoken, as here, of the whole people, Matthew limits to Christ; and justly, since upon Him alone, the grace of adoption is founded (Ho. xi.1; Mt. ii.15).³⁸

Christ is the center of adoption as he is the center of election. The Spirit must draw each member, even of the adopted covenant community, into fellowship with Christ, or the adoption remains but 'a visible image of the greater benefit that God bestowed on some out of the many.'³⁹ Covenant-adoption is a privileged order of life in which the Word of the promise is offered to those whose gracious 'inheritance right' it is. God's special election alone 'ratifies adoption';⁴⁰ while election as well as adoption are known alone by faith in Christ. It is easy to explain why the 'general election of a people,' by which he means the covenant relation, does not always issue in their salvation: 'to those with whom God makes a covenant, he does not at once give the Spirit of regeneration that would enable them to persevere in the covenant to the very end.'⁴¹ The Holy Spirit makes the saving difference by his gracious ministry, bringing the chosen member of the covenant into union with Christ. Because Christ is the 'foundation of adoption,' we need to examine Calvin's view of the Spirit's ministry in relation to Christ.

Calvin comments upon the Father's voice spoken from heaven at Jesus' baptism, 'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased' (Mt. 3:17). He relates this directly to our adoption. The Father spoke to Christ to assure him.

Christ was presented to us by the Father with this proclamation, in His coming forth to fulfill His task of Mediation, that we might rely on this pledge of our adoption and without fear call God himself our Father.⁴²

Calvin goes further to say that although the title of 'Son' belongs naturally only to Christ, he became incarnate 'that He who alone

38 *Ibid.*

39 III.21.7.

40 III.22.4.

41 III.21.7. Strangely, the Battles translation does not capitalize the word 'spirit' here. Comparison with III.24.8 shows that Calvin means the Holy Spirit: There he likewise refers to 'the Spirit of regeneration' in the context of the general and special calls of God; Battles there translates as a reference to the Holy Spirit. Cf. Calvin, *L'Institution Chrétienne*, Editions Kerygma—Editions Farel, 1978, 2:402.

42 *Comm. Mt. 3:17, A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark, and Luke.*

claimed Him as Father by right, could win Him for us also.' God's love was 'so content with Christ, that it could flow out on us all.' In the Gospels commentary and the sermon on Eph. 1:6, 'to the praise of the glory of his grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves,' Calvin notes that Paul interpreted Jesus' baptism as 'for us,' in order that we might obtain grace in the Son, 'that we may be loved by God.'⁴³ Calvin likewise interprets the Father's corresponding pronouncement at Christ's transfiguration. Calvin stresses our total unworthiness, and lays down adoption in the Beloved as teaching at once both our great misery, and the mystery of God's love for us.

In keeping with his careful development of the work of Christ as Mediator, Calvin works the rich stratum of the equipping of Christ in his humanity, to win redemption for us. This was the powerful ministry of the Spirit. 'He is endowed with the Spirit, not so much for His own sake, as for others. . . this is deliberately done to teach the faithful to receive and embrace with reverence His divine power, and not treat the weakness of His flesh with scorn.'⁴⁴ Ever sensitive to the history of redemption, rooted in the covenants, and seeing the profundity of the biblical representation of Jesus as the Last Adam, Calvin emphasizes the humiliation of Christ. He takes with full seriousness the weakness-humanity of Christ, showing his need of the Spirit's strength. He sees that the Spirit is given to Christ not only for himself, but for us. The result in redemptive history is the new experience of adoption received by the body of Christ in the New Testament. Commenting on Gal. 4:5, 'that we might receive the adoption as sons,' he writes that '... as at the last day, we receive the fruit of our redemption, so now we receive the fruit of our adoption. . .'⁴⁵

In evaluating Calvin's doctrine of adoption in light of redemptive history, we may ask whether it reflects the eschatological perspective of the New Testament. Does his view include aspects both of the 'already' and the 'not yet?' Calvin tends to treat the biblical term 'adoption' as a matter of present experience. When he comes to the 'not yet' of redemption, he prefers to speak of believers receiving the 'inheritance' of which adoption is the first fruits. In a number of contexts, he approaches an already/not yet framework, but does not quite explain adoption in terms of it. The adoption of the believer is related to the restoration of the created order under the Headship of Christ. 'God. . . by ingrafting us into His Son, constitutes us anew to be lords of the world, that we may lawfully use as our own all the wealth with which He supplies us.'⁴⁶

43 *Ibid.*

44 *Comm. Mt.* 3:16.

45 *Comm. Gal.* 4:5.

46 From a sermon on 1 Tim. 4:5, cited by Wallace, *Calvin's* 132.

Calvin does not understand Rom. 8:23, 'Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies' as referring to the completion of the believer's adoption in resurrection.

Paul improperly refers here to our *adoption* as the enjoyment of the inheritance into which we have been adopted. He has, however, very good reason for doing so, for he means that the eternal decree of God would be void unless the promised resurrection, which is the effect of that decree, were also certain. . . . Why is God our Father, if not that we should receive a heavenly inheritance after our earthly pilgrimage?⁴⁷

Again, he approaches an already/not yet framework in commenting on the hiddenness of our adoption until the revelation of Christ from heaven. On 1 Jn. 3:1-2, 'How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God! And that is what we are!' Calvin writes,

Although the ungodly may not entice us to give up hope, our present state is far short of the glory of God's children. Physically, we are dust and a shadow, and death is always before our eyes. We are exposed to a thousand miseries and our souls to innumerable evils. . . . The apostle means that we act wrongly in estimating by the present state of things what God has bestowed on us, when we ought with undoubting faith to hold to what does not yet appear. . . . The reason why God defers the manifestation of our glory is because Christ is not manifested in the power of His kingdom.⁴⁸

The semi-realized state of adoption is here in substance, if not in terminology. No doubt Calvin would have been able to refer to a future resurrection aspect of adoption itself, as it is found in Rom. 8:23, had he seen more clearly the relation between the believer's adoption and Christ's. There is apparently not a recognition that Christ's resurrection is presented by the New Testament as *his* adoption.⁴⁹ However, the elements of the already/not yet framework function in his exposition. Perhaps it was Calvin's focus on Christian experience that kept him from looking more closely at both protology and eschatology.

47 *Comm.* Rom. 8:23.

48 *Comm.* 1 Jn. 3:1.

49 Cf. Richard Gaffin's comment, 'The inherently forensic concept of adoption fulfills itself in the somatic transformation of resurrection, so that in view of the (Adamic) unity of the resurrection of Christ and believers, what is true of the latter holds for the former.' *Resurrection and Redemption, A Study in Paul's Soteriology*, (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987) 119.

III. Adoption in Christian experience

The idea of adoption also permeates Calvin's teaching on Christian experience. First, scripture presents our relation to God as one of adoption to stress the pure grace of it. 'God utterly hates and abhors us while we remain in our natural state.'⁵⁰

. . . Seeing then that our Lord Jesus Christ is received by God his Father to be the beloved, not only in his own person but also in respect of the love that is extended to all the members of his body, by this means we are gathered again and God embraces us as His children.⁵¹

Adoption is forensic: it establishes the sinner with the status of son. The schoolmen had suggested that Christ's work enabled fallen man to attain merit with God. Calvin counters with adoption: '. . . as soon as you are engrafted into Christ through faith, you are made a son of God and heir of heaven, a partaker in righteousness a possessor of life; and . . . you obtain not the opportunity to gain merit, but all the merits of Christ, for they are communicated to you.'⁵²

How does this come about? It is by the preaching of the gospel, a proclamation of God's message of adoption.⁵³ The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of adoption. He works faith in the elect by a secret influence, and joins them to Christ. Thus the secret adoption of election is reproduced in the soul of the elect sinner by the Spirit. Faith and adoption are correlative. The Holy Spirit is the bond who unites us to Christ by faith.⁵⁴ In a striking image, Calvin says that faith is the 'duplicate' of election/adoption.

I said before that faith proceeds from election and is the fruit of it, which shows that the root is hidden within. Whosoever then believes is thereby assured that God has worked in him, and faith is, as it were, the duplicate copy that God gives us of the original of our adoption. God has his eternal counsel, and he always reserves to himself the chief and original record of which he gives us a copy by faith.⁵⁵

The Spirit is called the Spirit of adoption, because he witnesses to us of God's Fatherly benevolence.⁵⁶ It is the confidence produced by the witness of the Spirit that distinguishes true faith from reprobate faith.⁵⁷ He testifies to the Word, so that 'to be assured of our salvation, we must begin with the Word, and . . . our confidence ought to be so

50 *Sermons on Ephesians* 45.

51 *Sermons on Ephesians* 46.

52 III.15.6.

53 III.25.3.

54 III.1.1.

55 *Sermons on Ephesians* 47.

56 III.1.3.

57 III.2.11.

intent as to call upon God as our Father.⁵⁸ This faith is both in the written Word, and in the Christ presented there.

Further, the Spirit produces assurance that we are the children of God.⁵⁹ The debate will doubtless continue over the relation of assurance to faith in Calvin. What is quite clear in his position is that all faith has *some* component of assurance. That is the work of the Spirit. Commenting on Rom. 8:16, 'The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children,' he writes

... the Spirit of God affords us such a testimony that our spirit is assured of the adoption of God, when He is our Guide and Teacher. Our mind would not of its own accord convey this assurance to us, unless the testimony of the Spirit preceded it. There is here also an explanation of the previous sentence, for while the Spirit testifies to us that we are the children of God, He at the same time pours this confidence into our hearts so that we dare invoke God as our Father. . . . For we must always hold fast the principle that we do not pray to God properly unless we are persuaded for certain in our hearts that he is our Father, when we call on Him as such.⁶⁰

Thus the Spirit is the author both of the objective knowledge of God, found in the Scriptures, and the subjective response of faith.⁶¹ He gives the believer, always in the context of faith in the Word, the consolation of God's sons, and the assurance of election.⁶²

But the experience of adoption is not pure consolation and comfort for the believer. Adoption appears in us because of the ethical transformation of the Spirit. Commenting on 1 Jn. 3:24, 'Those who obey his commandments live in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us,' he writes, '. . . it appears from this that we are God's children, when His Spirit rules and governs our life.'⁶³ Conformity to Jesus Christ, by the Spirit, is inseparable from justification.

Whomever, therefore, God receives into grace, he at the same time bestows the Spirit of adoption [Rom.8:15], by whose power he remakes them to his own image. But if the brightness of the sun can not be separated from its heat, shall we therefore say that the earth is warmed by its light or lighted by its heat? The sun, by its heat, quickens and fructifies the earth, by its beams brightens and illumines it. Here is a mutual and indivisible connection.⁶⁴

58 III.24.3.

59 See for instance, A. N. S. Lane, 'Calvin's Doctrine of Assurance', *Vox Evangelica* 9 (1979), 32-34, and Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979).

60 *Comm.* Rom. 8:16.

61 62. *Ibid.*

62 *Comm.* Rom. 8:32, and cf. III.24.1.

63 *Comm.* 1 Jn. 3:23-4, also 1 Jn. 4:17.

64 III.11.8.

In fact, obedience of life 'confirms' adoption.⁶⁵ 'Paul teaches us that only those are finally reckoned to be the sons of God who are ruled by His Spirit, since by this mark, God acknowledges His own.' The Spirit's 'leading' in Rom. 8:14 is 'sanctification.'⁶⁷ Calvin comments on Rom. 8:29:

The sum of the passage is that free adoption, in which our salvation consists, is inseparable from this other decree, that He had appointed us to bear the cross. No one can be an heir of heaven who has not first been conformed to the only-begotten Son of God.⁶⁸

This ethical-experiential conformity to Christ is the very eternal purpose of God. The grace of adoption has its end in good works: 'we are adopted on the ground that He should, in turn, have us as his obedient children.'⁶⁹

The practical effect of joining God's family is freedom to love God. Love for God flows in the channel of obedience to the moral law, not as a matter of merit, but of calling from God:

Whenever, therefore, we hear that he does good to those who keep his law, let us remember that the children of God are there designated by the duty that ought in them to be perpetual, and that we have been adopted for this reason: to reverence Him as our Father. Accordingly, not to renounce our right of adoption, we must ever strive in the direction of our call.⁷⁰

Strikingly, the ministry of the Spirit of adoption, which as Calvin often reminds us, produces faith and assurance of God's Fatherly love, at the same time leads to godly fear in the believer. By it a believer avoids provoking God, or calls on God for strength when he sees his own moral frailty in facing temptation. This fear *strengthens* faith. Believers are enabled by godly fear not to lose the grace of adoption.⁷¹ Calvin is quite clear that God preserves his elect children to the end. At just the same time, and in perfect harmony with this grace, they must persevere daily in the grace of justification and adoption.⁷² True humility follows from the grace of adoption.⁷³

They persevere by the Holy Spirit who dwells in them. Again we see Calvin's Christ-centered approach. The Spirit has been poured out on him as Mediator. The church is joined to Christ as his body by the

65 III.6.1.

66 *Comm.* Rom. 8:14.

67 *Ibid.*

68 *Comm.* Rom. 8:29.

69 *Comm.* 1 Pet. 1:14; also, *Sermons on Ephesians* 37.

70 III.17.6.

71 III.2.22.

72 Compare the title of III.14, 'The Beginning of Justification and Its Continual Progress'.

73 *Ibid.*

bond of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit of love poured out on the Son is given to him that he might 'instill it in his members.'⁷⁴ Since the same Spirit is in Christ and his members, there is a deeply rooted confidence of the love of the Father, and that love from God is reciprocated by his sons in return. The obedience therefore of the sons of God is sincere and permanent, not hirelings. This love is the effect of true faith, worked by the Spirit of adoption, 'poured out in our hearts, through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us' (Rom. 5:5). What follows is an ethic of adoption.

Calvin works this out in the realm of common grace. Even though God does often judge his enemies and 'drive them from the face of the earth, . . . in this area we do not have Him for an example to copy, for the judgment of the world does not rest upon us, but is his property.'⁷⁵ Instead, the ethic of adoption is kindness to the unworthy. In a passage of striking beauty (among many others), Calvin writes,

Do not think we are made sons of God by our kind deeds, but as the same Spirit (who is the Witness, and the Pledge and Seal, of our free adoption) corrects the base emotions of the flesh which contradict charity, Christ gives proof, from the effect, that the sons of God are precisely those who approach Him in their humility and tenderness. At this place Luke reads, *Ye shall be sons of the Most High.*

It is the free kindness, goodness, and mercy of God to vile sinners that marks his adoption; he encourages the same in his sons.⁷⁶

Another element of the children's experience is to know the providence of God as Father. Though God is merciful to all the world, he is yet more merciful to his children. ' . . . throughout their life in this present world they are specially protected from evil, specially provided for and specially blessed,' writes Wallace.⁷⁷ ' . . . As our heavenly Father nourishes us today, he will not fail us tomorrow.'⁷⁸ He cares for and feeds his children, but not with more bounty than is good for them! Too much bread will lead to temptation and sin in the still lustful children. Besides, not even an abundance would be any use 'unless it were divinely turned to nourishment.'

The Father's care has its blows too. Unbelievers and believers alike are struck by God's rods. The unbeliever's mind is 'fugitive,' he can not believe that God's judgments are from the true God, and for good. The believer, on the other hand, is called upon by Scripture to see that the rods are those of a Father's love. 'When believers find

74 III.2.12.

75 *Comm.* Mt. 5:45.

76 *Ibid.*

77 *Calvin's* 132-33.

78 III.20.44.

God in the midst of their punishments, they have a sure pledge of His loving kindness, because if He did not love them, He would not be concerned for their salvation.⁷⁹ Because we are his children, convinced of his love we are to reverence our Father's blows. Because God is our Father, he is very patient with us. We remain children to God all our lives, but we may remove ourselves from that number if we seek to avoid the Cross.

Calvin's emphasis on conformity to Christ in his humiliation is very strong. This too, is part of the meaning of adoption. Commenting on Rom 8:17, 'if indeed we suffer with him,' Calvin writes that the inheritance is ours because God has adopted us as sons by grace. But since Christ received the inheritance for us by suffering, so we must also travel that path.⁸⁰ Here again we notice the Christocentricity of his doctrine, and his attention to redemptive history.

We turn finally to Calvin's exposition of adoption in relation to prayer. Central to his presentation is the ministry of the Spirit of adoption in Rom. 8 and Gal. 4. The Spirit helps us, as Paul says in Rom. 8:26, because we are not naturally keen of mind nor warm-hearted. The Spirit is given to 'tell us what is right and to temper our emotions.'⁸¹ The 'groans too deep for words' are not the Spirit's groans, but the believer's. He is 'guided' to them by the Spirit. Battles notes that this is the same terminology Calvin uses with respect to the Spirit's 'guidance' to understand Scripture.⁸²

The Spirit gives us boldness to call on God as 'Father.' Conviction of God's holiness and our sin would preclude having the faith to call God 'Father,' apart from the witness of the Spirit of adoption in our hearts. Our hearts are naturally narrow and unbelieving: we do not easily believe the gospel. The remedy? The Spirit of adoption.

. . . not only is Christ the pledge and guarantee of our adoption, but he gives the Spirit as witness to us of the same adoption, through whom with free and full voice we may cry, 'Abba, Father.' Therefore, whenever any hesitation shall hinder us, let us remember to ask him to correct our fearfulness, and to set before us that Spirit that he may guide us to pray boldly.⁸³

For Calvin, true prayer is the exercise of faith in God as Father. This comes about only by adoption and the witness of the Spirit of adoption. In the Lord's Prayer, '. . . not only does the intimate name 'Father' engender trust but it is effective also, to keep our minds

79 *Comm. Heb.* 12:5-6.

80 *Comm. Rom.* 8:16.

81 III.20.5.

82 *Institutes* 856 n..

83 III.20.37.

from being drawn away to doubtful and false gods, permitting them to rise up from the only-begotten Son. . . .⁸⁴ Encouragement to pray, confidence that our sins are forgiven, and the tranquility to seek God's help are the effect of the Spirit of adoption.⁸⁵

As in living a holy life, the Spirit inwardly teaches the sons of God not only to trust God, but also to love the things that please him. As we pray, 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,' the truth of our adoption is made clear. Those who pray this prayer not filled with zeal for God's glory, should not be considered God's sons.⁸⁶ As the status of adoption brings the believer into freedom of conscience, a good conscience, so it leads him to obedience of life. Both are the fruit of the Spirit of adoption.⁸⁷

IV. Conclusion

We have seen that for Calvin, adoption is a fundamental structural category for the doctrine of salvation. If later ages would dig deeper into the redemptive historical understanding of the believer's adoption as conformity to Christ's exaltation/adoption, nevertheless Calvin is thoroughly Christ-centered in his understanding.⁸⁸ His doctrine of salvation is centered upon union with Christ in his death and resurrection, that union being established by the Spirit. Thus Calvin's doctrine of adoption can bring out both the forensic and the vital aspect of the New Testament teaching, distinguishing them without separation. They are like the heat and light of the sun.

I would like to look further into the discussion of 'Calvin versus the Calvinists.' But Calvin's emphasis on confidence as the sure mark of the Spirit's ministry inclines me to think that for him, assurance must be found in faith. The elements of Calvin's doctrine of adoption are beautifully summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter XII. Further study may demonstrate that the Assembly drew directly on the *Institutes*. In any event, the division between 'Calvin and the Calvinists' appears not to be very substantial.

If we do theology from the redemptive historical position, attention to the doctrine of creation and Adam as God's son will fill out Calvin's picture. Likewise, seen in light of the ultimate goal of God's work, adoption is the very heart of the gospel.

84 III.20.40.

85 *Comm.* Rom. 8:15; and 1 Jn. 3:21; cf. III.2.11.

86 III.20.43.

87 III.19.4,5.

88 This is to be understood as in *addition* to Christ's eternal and ontological status as Son of God. Cf. Gaffin, *Resurrection* 117f.

Abstract

The theme of adoption into the family of God has been largely neglected in studies of Calvin's theology. This is a serious oversight. Adoption is a central concept in Calvin's understanding of the gospel. The true knowledge of God the Creator, found in the gospel, is to know him as Father. The purpose of the incarnation and atonement is adoption. Election is a kind of incipient adoption. The work of the Spirit in salvation brings us to know God as Father. Calvin explores the biblical history of redemption in terms of the covenant, which he develops as 'the covenant of free adoption'. As pastor, Calvin develops Christian experience as adoption under the categories of comfort, chastening, and prayer. Behind this is his understanding of salvation as union with Christ through the Spirit.

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