

## ADOPTION INTO GOD'S FAMILY

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*"For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father."*—Romans 8:15

The apostle Paul drew from every phase of life to express the mighty truths of the gospel. So as a Roman citizen writing to residents of the city of Rome we are not surprised to see him drawing from the Roman law of adoption a figure to express the thought as to what is involved in our becoming children of God. We shall examine this truth as we consider, first, the practice; second, the product; third, the proof.

First, note the practice. When Paul said, ". . . ye have received the Spirit of adoption," he referred to a practice which was highly suggestive to his readers. The word used for "adoption" means "placing a son." It referred to a legal process whereby a man brought into his family and endowed with the status and privileges of a son one who was not by nature his son. This was a common custom among the Greeks, Romans, and other ancient peoples, but which does not appear in Jewish law or practice. Moses and Esther were adopted into the families of Pharaoh's daughter and Mordecai respectively (Ex. 2:10; Esther 2:7; cf. I Kgs. 11:20). But these were events in Egypt and Persia, not in Palestine. The idea appears in the New Testament only in the Pauline Epistles which were written to groups in Galatia and Rome, which also were outside Palestine.

Now the subjects of adoption varied. The one adopted might be a slave who thereby was removed from bondage into the liberty of sonship (cf. Moses). He might be a citizen who was a debtor, and who was thus forgiven the debt and made an heir of his foster father. Among the Greeks such an adopted son accepted

the legal obligations and religious duties of a real son. In Roman life even the natural son was under such absolute paternal authority as to be almost in the position of a slave. So for a slave or a free-man to be adopted meant that he was removed from the absolute power of his master or natural father into that of his adoptive father. In every instance the initiative in adoption lay with the adoptive father.

So comparing these customs with the spiritual experience we learn some very vital things about your becoming a child of God. In your natural state you are a slave to sin. Furthermore, you are a debtor to God because of your sinful transgression of His law. What Paul is saying, then, is that God has removed you from the bondage of sin into the liberty of being a son of God. He has forgiven your debt to Him and has made you His heir.

In a very real sense there is kinship between Paul's figure of adoption and Jesus' figure of the new birth. To be sure they belong to two different systems of thought, the one Gentile and the other Jewish. Strictly speaking the new birth refers to the origin and the inner moral quality involved in the Christian experience, while adoption refers more to the concrete relation effected when you become a child of God. But the end result is the same. In both God, through the grace that is in Christ Jesus, brings you into the relation of a child to his father whereby you enjoy the privilege of sonship.

Furthermore, this figure of adoption suggests that when you become a Christian you not only receive a privilege, but you also assume the responsibility of being a child of God. You are changed from the absolute authority of your

father, the Devil, and its slavery in sin into the absolute authority of God. Paul repeatedly referred to himself as a slave of Jesus Christ. In all of this God takes the initiative. This initiative is expressed in His saving love, the gift of His Son, and His offer of salvation through Him. So

Second, consider the product. In Romans 8:12-14 Paul says, "Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify (put to death) the deeds of the body, ye shall live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God."

Now apart from Christ you were dead in trespasses and in sin (Eph. 2:1). Therefore, you were a debtor to the flesh. But when you became a Christian you were no longer a debtor to the flesh. You became a debtor to God. But Paul is careful to point out that this debtorship was not one of bondage but of liberty. So long as you lived unto your fleshly nature, you were debtor to do the deeds of the flesh. But when you became a child of God you were freed from such debt. Henceforth you are to walk not after the flesh, but in the Spirit of God wherein is liberty. Now this does not mean that you are without obligation to God. But in the Spirit as a Child of God your service is rendered to Him not out of a sense of obligation, but as one of joy and privilege. You serve God because you love Him and delight to do His will.

Likewise Paul says that in your adoption into God's family, while you are transferred from a bondage to sin into a bondage to God, "ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father" (v.15). In other words a slave serves his master out of a sense of fear. But a son serves his father out of a sense of love. As a son of God you submit to His authority,

but, like Paul, you say, "I delight in the law of God" (Rom. 7:22). As such you do not cringe in fear before God as a slave before his owner. Instead as a child of God you live in confident love as you address God as "Abba, Father." The word "abba" is simply the transliteration of the Aramaic word for father, while the word "Father" is the translation of the Greek word meaning the same. Our Lord used the word "Abba" in Gethsemane (Mk. 14:36). It was the language of His childhood. In His hour of greatest distress He resorted to the language of a child rushing into the protective arms of His Father. The word "Father," in all likelihood, is not a translation of the Aramaic word "Abba." A little child often repeats the name of his father. The thought in Paul's phrase probably is intended to suggest the intimacy which you enjoy as an adopted child of God.

It is well to note a further thought involved in Romans 8:17. "And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together." This does not mean that you are a son of God in the same sense that Jesus is the Son of God. Jesus is the Son of God by nature. You become a son of God by grace. But what Paul does mean is that if you accept the privileges involved in sonship, like Jesus you must also accept the responsibilities that grow out of such a relation, both from the standpoint of the custom of Roman law and of the very nature of your Christian experience. Now

Third, note the proof. How may you know that you are a son of God? Of course, under Roman law there would be legal papers to show that those involved had complied with the law governing adoption. The same may be true in your spiritual adoption.

In the New Testament we are clearly told that if we trust in the Lord Jesus we shall be saved. Now in I John 5:6-8

we read, "This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost (Spirit): and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one."

Now what is John saying? He is simply proving that in Jesus God has provided salvation for all who will accept it. The reference to water does not refer to your baptism. Neither does the reference to water and blood refer to baptism and the Eucharist as some insist. Nor does this dual reference have to do with the fact that water mingled with blood flowed from Jesus' side on the cross (Jn. 19:34). Instead John is pointing out three earthly proofs that Jesus was God come in the flesh for your salvation. To do so he refers to "water" or Jesus' baptism whereby He was dedicated to His saving work. He refers to "blood" or the cross where Jesus' saving work reached its consummation. That these are separate events John shows by using the definite article with both. It is "the water" and "the blood." He refers to the "Spirit" since it was at Jesus' baptism that the Holy Spirit came upon Him, suggesting also the "voice" of God whereby Jesus was declared as God's beloved Son in whom He was well pleased.

Furthermore, John says that in heaven the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit bear record to the saving ministry of Jesus. So John says that both in heaven and on earth we have the record of the Saviourhood of Jesus. John then closes this discussion by saying, "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself . . . and this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.

He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life" (I Jn. 5:10-12).

So in this light you can understand Paul's word in Romans 8:16. "The Spirit itself (Himself) beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God." What do you find then? God has given His Son to be your Saviour. This record is in heaven (I Jn. 5:7) and also recorded in the Bible. The record is in earth as evidenced by Jesus' saving work. He dedicated Himself in His baptism. He sacrificed Himself on the cross. To both of these the Holy Spirit bears witness. Now the rest is dependent upon your faith in Jesus as your Saviour.

So as the Roman adopted son could refer to the legal record, so you can refer to the spiritual record. The question is "Have you believed in Jesus as your Saviour?" Have you fulfilled the condition? Believing in Jesus is more than intellectual belief. It is willful trust in Jesus and Jesus alone, for your salvation.

If you have done so, then you are a child of God. You are not saved by your feelings, but by your trust in Jesus. Does the Holy Spirit bear witness with your spirit that you have done so? The Holy Spirit convicts you of your sin. He points you to the Saviour. He gives you the power to trust in Him. He empowers you with the new birth, or as Paul says, with the privilege of adoption. He gives to you the promise and assurance of God that if you comply with the condition you shall receive the result. Do you have this assurance? If so, then rejoice in it. If not, then this moment believe in Christ as your Saviour, knowing that "he that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness himself"—not some emotional upheaval or spasmodic reaction necessarily—but the firm and abiding conviction that you have fully believed that "this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son."