

Calvin's Practical View of Adoption: Its Privileges and Duties

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I. Introduction

On June 25th, 1944, *The Doctor*—Martyn Lloyd-Jones—gave a radio address for the BBC in Wales on the man, John Calvin. He began with the statement:

Nothing is more significant of the great change which has happened in the field of theology during the past twenty years than the place now afforded, and the attention given, to the great man of Geneva who is the subject of this address.¹

The same can be said for America today, as the resurgence of Calvinism—both the New-Calvinist and the Old—is growing faster, larger, and deeper into the roots of Evangelical Theology since the Great Awakening in the 1700s. Lloyd-Jones went on in his address, noting that, “Up to almost twenty years ago there was very little attention paid to John Calvin, and when someone spoke of him it was in order to heap insults on him scornfully.”² The former part of this statement essentially summarizes the standpoint of America in the past fifty to eighty years. Unfortunately, with the climax of *Dispensationalism* between the 1950s and 1970s, and with the growth of evangelical phenomena such as *Fundamentalism*, the *Mega-Church* movements, and *Seeker-Friendly* ideals, John Calvin and the Calvinist-Reformed Faith as a whole was laid aside. If it was brought up for discussion, it was laughed at as though it was a cult of some sort.

However, as Lloyd-Jones affirmed further in his address:

That is not the situation today. In fact, there is more mention of him than there has been for almost a century, and Calvin and Calvinism are the subjects of many arguments and debates in theological circles... The time is ripe, therefore, for us to cast another glance at this man who has influenced the life of the world to such an extent.³

And so we see a rising tide of Calvinism in America today. By the end of this year alone there will have been more books published, and more conferences and addresses given—

¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Knowing the Times: Addresses Delivered on Various Occasions 1942-1977*. (Carlsle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 32.

² *Ibid.*, 32.

³ *Ibid.*, 32-3.

that is, more than *ever*—on the man who, in my opinion, is the greatest theologian of all time: John Calvin. And like *The Doctor*, I say, “The time is ripe.” We have gathered here in Geneva for the 500th birthday of John Calvin—not merely to popularize him or idolize him, because Calvin would have never wanted that. We are here, rather, to make known and lift up John Calvin’s God—our God—The Supreme Being, The LORD who sits in authority and reigns over all things in complete sovereignty. I would like to consider an important, yet often neglected aspect of John Calvin’s theology as it finds expression in his vast corpus of writings – the doctrine of adoption.

II. *John Calvin and Adoption*

At the heart of John Calvin's theology and undergirding his development of the *ordo salutis* is the doctrine of adoption. Many scholars note that Calvin does not treat adoption as a separate locus in his systematic theology and magnum opus, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. This is due in part to the fact that Calvin weaves the doctrine throughout the tapestry of God's marvelous work in the salvation of sinners. The doctrine of adoption is not peripheral, but rather central to Calvin's theology as noted by Sinclair Ferguson who states that "students of Calvin's theology have too rarely recognized how important the concept of sonship was to his understanding of the Christian life."⁴ Having said this, Timothy Trumper's unpublished dissertation on the doctrine of adoption in the Calvinistic tradition fills a lacuna in the study of Calvin's theology of adoption⁵, nevertheless, a detailed study of the privileges and duties of adoption is useful.

The doctrine of adoption is not restricted to the *Institutes* per se, but one must rather glean the riches of Calvin's view of adoption from his entire corpus of writings including his commentaries and sermons. Having done this, one comes to the conclusion that the doctrine of adoption was very real in the life of John Calvin and he sought to instill the beauty and riches of adoption in those people to whom he ministered. Christ's Church today receives the legacy of Calvin's view of adoption, which speaks doctrinally and experientially to the life of the believer. This paper will seek to examine Calvin's

⁴ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Reformed Doctrine of Sonship, in Pulpit and People, Essays in Honor of William Still*, Nigel M. DeS. Cameron and Sinclair B. Ferguson, Eds. (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1986) pp. 81-6.

⁵ Timothy J. R. Trumper, "An Historical Study of the Doctrine of Adoption in the Calvinistic Tradition" (Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, 2001), passim.

corpus of writings and demonstrate the treasure house of the privileges and duties of adoption for the believer.

III. *The Privileges of Adoption*

The blessings and privileges outlined in Calvin's theology of adoption are many and varied. It is helpful to organize these privileges under a Trinitarian rubric: paternal privileges given especially by the Father, fraternal privileges given especially by the Son and spiritual privileges given especially by the Holy Spirit. This Trinitarian framework of adoption in Calvin's theology is succinctly summarized by Sinclair Ferguson when he writes, "But for Calvin, piety meant recognizing that our lives are nourished by God's *Fatherly* care; it meant knowing oneself to be a child of God. Similarly, Calvin saw the purpose of the incarnation and atonement to be the adoption of Christians. Consequently, the 'first title' of the Spirit is 'Spirit of adoption'."⁶ There are also other categories which work on a sub-level within the Trinitarian rubric: covenantal privileges and eschatological privileges.⁷ The privileges that the adopted children of God receive are rich and find their full expression in the redemptive and applicatory work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁸

The fountainhead of adoption and its privileges in Calvin's thought is found in God the Father. Specifically the privileges that the adopted child of God receives are the comfort of the Father's providence and the assurance received through the Father's electing grace.

⁶ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Reformed Doctrine of Sonship*, 82.

⁷ For a further delineation of these categories see Nigel Westhead, "Adoption in the Thought of John Calvin," *The Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 13 (Fall 1995): 102-115 and Howard Griffith, "The First Title of the Spirit: Adoption in Calvin's Soteriology," *Evangelical Quarterly* 73:2 (2001): 135-153.

⁸ This paper speaks strictly of redemptive sonship. Westhead notes that Calvin denies natural sonship and God's universal Fatherhood in the context of creation, but resoundingly affirms redemptive sonship as it finds expression in the electing and redeeming grace of God through Jesus Christ in the context of soteriology. For a further discussion see Nigel Westhead, "Adoption in the Thought of John Calvin," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 13 (Fall 1995): 103-104.

Adoption assures the believer of God's Fatherly electing grace. The electing grace of the Father almost becomes synonymous in Calvin's writings with the doctrine of adoption. He does not clearly delineate between these two concepts but rather merges them to show how adoption becomes a confirmation of election. Howard Griffith in his article clearly proves that election and adoption are closely tied in Calvin's thought when he states:

It is quite clear that Calvin's intention was to use the biblical teaching on election as Scripture 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.⁹

Adoption can be conceived of as the rearview mirror if you will, confirming the electing grace of the Father in the life of the believer. The close relationship of election and adoption serves to assure the believer that he is indeed a child of God.

In his *Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, Calvin closely links election and adoption when he says, "So, when our Lord engraveth his fear in our hearts by his holy spirit, and such an obedience towards him, as his Children ought to perform unto him, this is as if he should set upon us the seal of his election, and as if he should truly testify that he hath adopted us and that he is a Father unto us."¹⁰ Throughout the *Institutes* he makes several references to the close relation between election and adoption where free election by the grace of God becomes the ground of the believer's adoption. He states, "We were adopted in Christ into the eternal inheritance because in ourselves we were not capable of such great excellence."¹¹ Furthermore, man cannot renovate himself to

⁹ Griffith, "The First Title of the Spirit," 138.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *John Calvin's Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, trans. John Field (Audubon, NJ: Old Paths Publications, 1996), 98-9.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J.T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 3. 22.1.

receive the adoption of sons, nor is adoption because of any foreseen merit on God's part, because "God's special election towers and rules over all, alone ratifying his adoption."¹²

This assurance of election is further buttressed in his *Sermons on Ephesians* where he says, "When he [Paul] says that God has predestinated us by adoption, it is to show that if we be God's children it is not through nature but through his pure grace...For we have no such status by birth or inheritance, neither does it come of flesh and blood."¹³ The assurance this affords the believer is that it is by the grace of God in Jesus Christ that they are adopted into the family of God and thus "they whom he calls to salvation ought not to seek the cause of it anywhere else than in this gratuitous adoption."¹⁴ Calvin continues speaking of the assurance that election and adoption affords the believer:

Whosoever then believes is thereby assured that God has worked in him, and faith, as it were, the duplicate copy that God gives us of the original of our adoption...It follows then that if we have faith, we are also adopted. For why does God give us faith? Even because he elected us before the creation of the world. This therefore is an infallible order, that insofar as the faithful receive God's grace and embrace his mercy, holding Jesus Christ as their Head, to obtain salvation in this way, they know assuredly that God has adopted them.¹⁵

Far from declaring God's election to be cold, calculating and deterministic, Calvin ties election and adoption closely together showing the comfort and warmth that can be derived from doing so. Election becomes the ground of adoption, and thus offers assurance to the child of God that he really is one of God's children. The root of adoption is not found in the believer, but in God the Father, through Jesus Christ.

Adoption comforts the believer with God's Fatherly providence. Upon adoption, the believer is not left to fend for himself, but comes under the Fatherly providence of

¹² Ibid., 3.22.4.

¹³ John Calvin, *John Calvin's Sermons on Ephesians*, trans. Arthur Golding (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1973), 39.

¹⁴ Ibid., 43.

¹⁵ Ibid., 47.

God. This Fatherly providence comforts and offers care in the midst of a world that seems to say that it cares, and it offers protection in the face of governments that seem to say that they care and protect its citizens. While not relating it to adoption specifically, Calvin demonstrates that the providence of God includes both material or natural, as well as spiritual blessings:

That not only does he sustain this universe (as he once founded it) by his boundless might, regulate it by his wisdom, preserve it by his goodness, and especially rule mankind by his righteousness and judgment, bear with it in his mercy, watch over it by his protection; but also that no drop will be found either of wisdom and light, or of righteousness or power or rectitude, or of genuine truth, which does not flow from him and of which he is not the cause.¹⁶

Furthermore, “though God is merciful to all the world, he is yet more merciful to his children... He cares for and feeds his children, but not with more bounty than is good for them.”¹⁷ God’s providence includes not only good things, but also the rod of correction. The unbeliever sees these things as negative, but the child of God sees it as the rod of the Father’s correction, bearing the stamp of his love.

Calvin applies the doctrine of adoption by way of contrast, demonstrating how the doctrine of adoption functions in the life of the believer, but also serves to provoke the unbeliever to jealousy in regards to God’s paternal care. The wicked are subject to torments, trembling and a lack of assurance that “God beareth a fatherly affection unto him.”¹⁸ In addressing the believer about the privilege of being under the providence of God, Calvin counsels believers not to be lulled into sleep as a child of God but “Let us learn to keep ourselves in that favor and testimony that we have, that in that he hath adopted us for his children, he will always show himself a father towards us.”¹⁹ It is when the believer learns to keep himself in this frame of soul that “it is certain that we

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 1.2.1.

¹⁷ Wallace and Calvin quoted in Howard Griffith, “The First Title of the Spirit,” 150.

¹⁸ Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, 198.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 199.

shall overcome all fear...God is with us, and that we are well assured against all evil.”²⁰ God’s providence includes “protecting, guiding, confirming, using, supporting, governing, mortifying, keeping, delivering, and increasing his children.”²¹ Having been chosen and adopted by the Father, the believer now comes under the Father’s care and providence receiving the title of heir to a vast spiritual treasury. Calvin notes that “When a man adopts a child he chooses him to be his heir, and all the goods that he has afterwards are passed on under that title. So it is with us who are heirs of the heavenly life because God has adopted and chosen us for his children.”²²

Perhaps the greatest privilege that a child of God receives upon adoption is Christ, the Son of the Father. Christ becomes the treasure and focus of an adopted child of God with all the privileges that Christ gives. Christ is the apex, the agent, and the achiever of the believer’s adoption. As seen earlier in Calvin’s thought election played a prominent role in the believer’s adoption, but that election is in Christ. Outside of Christ, election is not possible, nor would the adoption of children be possible.

Adoption makes the believer an heir of salvation through Christ. The adopted child of God becomes the recipient of salvation through Christ, for “the name of Christ excludes all merit, and everything which men have of their own.”²³ Christ’s merits, through His obedience, death and resurrection, are what secure the believer’s adoption. This is clear from Calvin’s writing on the purpose of why God had to become man. He had to become man to rescue us from our self-made hell, to conquer death, and to procure

²⁰ Ibid., 199.

²¹ Trumper, “An Historical Study of the Doctrine of Adoption in the Calvinistic Tradition,” 180.

²² Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on Ephesians*, 40.

²³ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries on Ephesians*, Vol. 21 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005 reprint), 198.

salvation for his people.²⁴ This too, serves the believer's assurance of salvation and heir to the Kingdom, "for the Son of God, to whom it wholly belongs, has adopted us as his brothers."²⁵ This work of salvation was achieved through the Incarnation, when "ungrudgingly he took our nature upon himself to impart to us what was his, and to become both Son of God and Son of man in common with us."²⁶

In his application of the doctrine of adoption, it must be noted that Calvin was discriminatory, opening up its comforts to believers, but also preserving this doctrine from those who would abuse it in unbelief. This discriminatory note can be detected when he cautions that the Incarnation must not be used to automate adoption. Just because Christ came in human flesh does not mean that all are the children of God. He argues rightly that "when we say that Christ was made man that he might make us children of God, this expression does not extend to all men. For faith intervenes, to engraft us spiritually into the body of Christ."²⁷

The fact that the believer becomes an heir of Christ also has eschatological dimensions. Although this is present in the Pauline doctrine of adoption, Calvin also brings it out in the Johannine complement of the same doctrine. He clearly brings out the 'now-not yet' tension of the enjoyment of the inheritance that believers receive through adoption. In his *Commentary on 1 John*, especially 1 John 3:2, Calvin notes that the believer's condition as an adopted child of God has not yet reached full fruition and the believer is subject to death, misery, and all manner of evil. He counsels the believer to consider the privileges that yet await being stored up in heaven, looking to the coming of

²⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 2.12.2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.12.2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.12.2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.13.2.

Christ which sustains faith, “because the fruit of our adoption is as yet hid, for in heaven is our felicity, and we are now far away travelling on the earth.”²⁸ This tension is also apparent in his *Commentary on Romans* in which he highlights the fact that the believer’s inheritance through adoption will be fully realized in the future. He states that “we shall partake of it in common with the only-begotten Son of God,” which requires patience and endurance in the present Christian life.²⁹

Adoption frees the child of God from bondage of the Law through Christ. This discussion finds a prominent place in Calvin’s treatment of adoption and the law in his *Commentary on Galatians*. The fact that Christ was subjected to the law was for the benefit of his children. He did so freely, choosing “to become liable to keep the law, that exemption from it might be obtained for us.”³⁰ Calvin clearly cautions however, that freedom from the law in Christ does not necessitate abrogation of the law as a rule for the life of the believer, an issue which will be discussed under the duties of adoption.³¹ Under the Old Covenant, the believers did not yet enjoy the fruit of adoption – freedom from the bondage of the law through its ceremonies and appendages. The New Testament believer under the covenant of grace now enjoys the privilege of freedom from the law in that Christ is now his righteousness. Calvin argues within a covenantal framework that “the fathers, under the Old Testament, were certain of their adoption, but did not so fully as yet enjoy their privilege.”³² The freedom from the law that the believer now enjoys through adoption is different because this fruit of adoption is fully

²⁸ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries on 1 John*, Vol. 22 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005 reprint), 204-5.

²⁹ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries on Romans*, Vol. 19 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005 reprint), 301.

³⁰ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries on Galatians*, Vol. 21 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005 reprint), 119.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

³² *Ibid.*, 119.

realized in Christ. Calvin is careful not to disown Old Testament believers as children of God, for he says, “The ancients were also sons of God, and heirs through Christ, but we hold the same character in a different manner; for we have Christ present with us, and in that manner enjoy his blessings.”³³

The character of this freedom from the law is clearly seen in his *Institutes* where he speaks of Christ being made a curse for us quoting Galatians 3:13 and Deuteronomy 27:26.³⁴ He goes on to directly connect the adoption of sons and the freedom from the law so that “we should not be borne down by an unending bondage, which would agonize our consciences with the fear of death.”³⁵ The freedom that the believer enjoys is freedom from conscience, because Christ has been made a curse on his behalf. Furthermore, this freedom is realized in the fact that all the ceremonial laws have been abolished in Christ.³⁶

Adoption makes the believer part of the ‘wonderful exchange’ through Christ. In his article, “Adoption in the Thought of John Calvin,” Nigel Westhead lists this wonderful exchange as part and parcel of adoption. The substance of this exchange is best seen in Calvin’s own words in discussing the fruits of the Lord’s Supper:

This is the wonderful exchange which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us with his righteousness.³⁷

³³ Ibid., 122. This discussion takes place in Calvin’s discussion of adoption within the Old and New Covenants. He traces the biblical theological progression of adoption from the Old to the New Testaments. For further study see

³⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 2.7.15.

³⁵ Ibid., 2.7.15.

³⁶ Ibid., 2.7.16.

³⁷ Ibid., 4.17.2.

This is the wonderful exchange that the believer enjoys as part of being an adopted child of God.

Adoption comprehends the conformity of the believer to the image of Christ. The Apostle Paul speaks about Christ being the prototype of all the sons of God, “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate *to be* conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29 AV). Calvin highlights this as being one of the greatest privileges that the believer enjoys as being an adopted son of God. He writes, “God had so determined that all whom he has adopted should bear the image of Christ...that he might teach us that there is in Christ a living and conspicuous exemplar, which is exhibited to God’s children for imitation.”³⁸ Elsewhere he writes that “the final end of our adoption is, that what has in order preceded in Christ, shall at length be completed in us...we have eyes prepared to see God.”³⁹ This conforming to Christ’s image will prepare the believer to behold Christ in his glory, removing impurities, weaknesses and sin.

Adoption incorporates the believer into the family of God. When a child of God is adopted, his allegiances change. The devil is no longer his father, but God is His Father through Jesus Christ, and he leaves the sinful family behind and joins the family of God. In his *Sermons on Micah*, Calvin poses the question, “For who are we, that God should honor us by taking us into his own house? For when God decided to adopt us as his children, that already constituted an honor that overshadowed all the possible honors of this world.”⁴⁰ This new family or “dwelling place of God’s children is more to be

³⁸ Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries on Romans*, 318.

³⁹ Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries on 1 John*, 205-6.

⁴⁰ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Book of Micah*, trans. and ed. by Benjamin Wirt Farley (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003), 193.

desired than anything else in the world.”⁴¹ The church is part of the family of God and takes a prominent place in Calvin’s theology. If God is the believer’s Father, then the church is the believer’s mother, the arena in which the believer is conceived, given life, and nourished.⁴² The church is where God’s children receive God’s fatherly love and the “especial witness of the spiritual life.”⁴³ Calvin’s doctrine of adoption shows the privilege of belonging to God’s family both on a vertical plane, having God as Father, and a horizontal plane, being joined to the church and the family of God.

The third part of the framework in which Calvin develops the doctrine of adoption is centered on the Spirit and his role in adoption. The Spirit cannot and must not be divorced from the doctrine of adoption, and Calvin develops this third section in a biblical manner, drawing out the beauty and assistance that the Spirit offers to the believer as an adopted child of God.

Adoption is witnessed and sealed by the Spirit. Calvin confirms in his *Tracts* that the Spirit is the witness, seal and earnest of the believer’s adoption.⁴⁴ Scripture calls the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of adoption because “he is the witness to us of the free benevolence of the God with which God the Father has embraced us in his beloved only-begotten Son to become a Father to us.”⁴⁵ This witness of the Spirit of the believer’s adoption is a co-witness. This co-witness takes place when the Spirit “testifies to us, that we are the children of God, he at the same time pours into our hearts such confidence, that we

⁴¹ Ibid., 193.

⁴² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.4.

⁴³ Ibid., 4.1.4.

⁴⁴ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Selected Works: Tracts, Part 3*, Vol. 3, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 154.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.1.3.

venture to call God our Father.”⁴⁶ The ensuing privilege of the child of God is then assurance.

Adoption obtains assurance for the believer through the work of the Spirit. This fruit is really bound up closely with the preceding privilege of adoption, that the believer has the Spirit as his witness. They are almost inseparable because as the Spirit witnesses to the heart, the believer is assured that he is a child of God. Calvin ties these two concepts together in his comments on Romans 8:16 where he says that “the Spirit of God gives us such a testimony, that when he is our guide and teacher, our spirit is made assured of the adoption of God: for our mind of its own self, without the preceding testimony of the Spirit, could not convey to us this assurance.”⁴⁷ This is corroborated in the statement that this assurance issues forth in a cry to God.⁴⁸ While adoption affords assurance of God’s electing grace in the life of the believer, the Spirit works that assurance in the heart of God’s adopted children.⁴⁹

Adoption ensures a life of prayer by the Spirit. The life of prayer for the child of God is worked by the Holy Spirit. Calvin argues that it is through Christ and his work that the believer can now enter boldly before God and pray because the veil has been torn away between sinners and God through Christ’s ministry of reconciliation.⁵⁰ It is however, the Spirit that works boldness in the hearts of believers to go to God in prayer through Christ, and Calvin highlights the necessity of enlisting the help of the Spirit in prayer.⁵¹ The Spirit assists the believer despite their weaknesses in prayer, “if we

⁴⁶ Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries on Romans*, 299.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 299.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on Election and Reprobation*, 286.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 312.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on Galatians*, trans. Kathy Childress (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1997), 374.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 374.

remember that God is still our Father and that we must seek refuge in him.”⁵² With the witness and testimony of the Spirit with the believer’s spirit comes true prayer. This is affirmed when Calvin argues from biblical evidence that unless the Spirit testifies in our hearts, working confidence regarding the Father’s love, “our tongues would be dumb, so that they could utter no prayers.”⁵³ Right prayer issues forth from Spirit-worked assurance.

Calvin succeeds in demonstrating that this Spirit of prayer is not only present in the New Testament but also in the Old. The ministry of the Spirit of adoption is effectual for the Old Testament saints as well. He illustrates this effectively in the life and prayer of the prophet Habakkuk. The prophet prays in Habakkuk 3:1-2 for God to revive his work. This is nothing else than an appeal using the “favour of adoption.” He continues that the prophet “thus confesses that there was no reason why God should forgive his people except that he had been pleased freely to adopt them and to choose them as his peculiar people.”⁵⁴ Calvin uses Habakkuk as a model for the prayer life of the adopted child of God when he says, “Now we have this in common with the ancient people, that God adopts us... We may therefore adopt this form of prayer, which is prescribed for us by the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁵

The Holy Spirit does not only aid in individual prayer for the people of God of certain ethnicity and language, but prayer can be offered by any person of any ethnicity or language. This is illustrated by the Spirit-indicted cry, “Abba, Father.” In using this phrase, Calvin uniquely argues that the adoption is both to the Jew and Gentile. The

⁵² Ibid., 374.

⁵³ Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries on Romans*, 299.

⁵⁴ Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries on Habakkuk*, Vol. 15 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005 reprint), 138.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 138.

word Abba is Hebrew and the word Father is in Greek demonstrating that “we can call upon God in any language, as with one voice, confident that God will receive us now that we have the liberty to address him.”⁵⁶ The Spirit’s witness in prayer is an integral part of the believer’s privilege of praying with boldness since as Griffith notes so well, “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.”⁵⁷

Adoption ensures a life of sanctification through the Spirit. The adopted believer has the Holy Spirit as his witness and seal, and the Spirit has engraved the promises of God upon our hearts, namely the fact that “we see and feel by experience that God has adopted us and tells us that the assurance he has given us and daily gives us by his gospel, namely, that he will be our Father.”⁵⁸ In his doctrine of adoption, Calvin sees the Spirit leading the believer onwards and upwards to a life of sanctification. He says that “we have a good and infallible pledge that God will guide us to the end, and that since he had begun to lead us into the way of salvation, he will bring us to perfection to which he calls us, because, in truth, without him we could not continue so much as a single day.”⁵⁹

Through the Spirit’s witness and indwelling the child of God has a Paraclete, a Strengthened and Sustainer for the life of sanctification. Calvin notes that:

Wherever the Spirit is, he necessarily manifests his power and efficiency...it hence appears that we are God’s children, that is, when his Spirit rules and governs our life...whatever good works are done by us, proceed from the grace of the Spirit, and that the Spirit is not obtained by our righteousness, but is freely given to us.⁶⁰

The Spirit is freely given for the believer’s sanctification, another high privilege belonging to the child of God. The graces of sanctification are bestowed by the Spirit

⁵⁶ Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on Galatians*, 381.

⁵⁷ Griffith, “The First Title of the Spirit,” 151.

⁵⁸ Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on Ephesians*, 48.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁰ Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries on 1 John*, 227.

alone, and “whomever therefore, God receives into grace, he at the same time bestows the Spirit of adoption, by whose power he remakes them to his own image.”⁶¹

Calvin’s doctrine of adoption is a clear and unmistakable part of his soteriology. Although he does not develop a specific chapter on adoption in his *Institutes*, he develops it throughout his vast corpus of writings. In doing so, he brings out the beautiful experiential realities and privileges of adoption for the child of God as they are found in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

⁶¹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.11.6.

IV. The Duties that Flow from Adoption

John Calvin gives a fundamental description of adoption, stating that it is “not the cause merely of a partial salvation, but bestows salvation entire.”⁶² Calvin saw that adoption was related to all of salvation—including predestination, election, calling, and justification. For John Calvin, adoption was what brought the sinner into the arms of the Father. Garret A. Wilterdink states, “For Calvin, adoption into the family of God is synonymous with salvation.”⁶³ This meant for Calvin that adoption happens when salvation occurs in the heart of the new believer. Calvin did not separate adoption from the act of what God does in the heart of the sinner. To understand this view, it is vital to see how salvation and adoption go hand-in-hand. It is not possible to be saved and yet not be adopted. In the same manner, one cannot be adopted without being saved. Calvin saw this as being an essential truth, and also saw that the implications of this in the life of a believer are of extreme importance in how one is to live as a saved, adopted son or daughter of their heavenly Father.

The doctrine of adoption plays a major role in Calvin’s tracts, letters, sermons, *Institutes*, and most importantly, his commentaries. Timothy Trumper states, “It is increasingly apparent that the commentaries are indispensable to an appreciation of Calvin’s theology of adoption.”⁶⁴ When one considers Calvin’s development of adoption he begins by stating that it is motivated by the Father’s electing grace in Christ. This is best seen through Calvin’s own words:

⁶² John Calvin, “The True Method of Giving Peace to Christendom, and of the Reforming Church”, in *Calvin’s Selected Works: Tracts*, 275.

⁶³ Garret A. Wilterdink, “The Fatherhood of God in Calvin’s Thought,” in *Calvin’s Theology, Theology Proper, Eschatology*, Vol. 9 of *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*, ed. Richard Gamble (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1992), 185.

⁶⁴ Trumper, “An Historic Study of the Doctrine of Adoption in the Calvinistic Tradition,” 47.

It is not from a perception of anything that we deserve, but because our heavenly Father has introduced us, through the privilege of adoption, into the body of Christ. In short, the name of Christ excludes all merit, and everything which men have of their own; for when he says that we are chosen in Christ, it follows that in ourselves we are unworthy.⁶⁵

Calvin saw that adoption was designed for the glory of God, in that those saved by the gospel are then to live for the glory of God in holiness, purity, and doing every deed in obedience to honor their heavenly Father. To Calvin, adoption was not just a blessing; he knew that the privileges that were given to the believer upon the act of adoption came with responsibilities. Calvin saw adoption not only as a promised inheritance for believers, but also as a way in which believers are to think, live, and transform their new life according to the Word of God.

Adoption calls one to live as a child of God. Calvin states at the beginning of his third sermon on the first chapter of Ephesians:

I began to show you earlier that it is not lawful for us to indulge in loose living with the excuse that God has elected us before the creation of the world, as though it were right for us to give ourselves over to all manner of evil, because we cannot perish, seeing that God has taken us for his children. For we must not put things asunder which he has couple together. Seeing that he has chosen us to be holy and to walk in purity of life, our election must be as root that yields good fruits... And whence comes this change but only through the grace that we spoke of, namely, that he elected and chose us for his children before we were born into the world.⁶⁶

For Calvin, being an adopted child of God is vital to the Christian life. Becoming a Christian is not a joke; it is not to be taken lightly. One who is a child of God is to live like it—representing what his Father did, who his Father is, and how his Father acts. In other words, Calvin saw that believers are to represent the very image of their new heavenly Father. Upon adoption, the fruits of believers' lives are to be holy and done in a loving way that represents their Father. They are to put away the lusts of the flesh and to

⁶⁵ Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries on Ephesians*, 198.

⁶⁶ Calvin, *John Calvin's Sermons on Ephesians*, 35.

revel in the fact that they are now the sons and daughters of the Almighty God, and as such, want to portray their Father in whatever they do.⁶⁷

Adoption calls one to live a life of suffering. In Calvin's Commentary on Romans chapter 8, verse 17 he states:

We are co-heirs with Christ, provided, in entering on our inheritance, we follow him in the same way in which he has gone before. And he (Paul) thus made mention of Christ, because we have by his grace been *adopted* as his children; and that it may be doubtful, its possession has already conferred on Christ, whose partners we are become: but Christ came to the cross; then we must come to it in the same manner.⁶⁸

Calvin understood that those adopted are to follow after Christ—their elder Brother—in that they are called to suffer as well; that it is a duty to suffer like Christ. Calvin's view of partaking in the inheritance as adopted sons and daughters of God is that it ought to be like that of Christ in every way. The child of God is to be remade into his image and partake of his suffering.

Adoption calls one to live a prayerful life. While dealing with Romans 8:16, Calvin says the following about the Spirit through whom we cry *Abba*:

For we must ever hold fast this principle, -that we do not rightly pray to God, unless we are surely persuaded in our hearts, that he is our Father, when we so call him with our lips. To this there is a corresponding part, - that our faith has no true evidence, except we call upon God. It is not then without reason that Paul, bringing us to test, shows that it then only appears how truly any one believes, when they who have embraced the promise of grace, exercise themselves in prayers.⁶⁹

Calvin preached a sermon entitled, "Crying Out to God in the Certainty of Our Adoption," and on the topic of prayer in the life of the adopted, states that "we know that God demands this (prayer) sacrifice of us all – that we call upon him and take refuge in him – for this is a way of proving he is our Father and the source of all good things."⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.14.5, on Calvin's view on the person of Christ and adoption.

⁶⁸ Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries on Romans*, 301-2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 299-300.

⁷⁰ Calvin, *John Calvin's Sermons on Galatians*, 381-82.

It is a blessing that believers can pray and call upon their Father, but Calvin expressed how important it was to recognize that exercising prayer is not merely a blessing, but a responsibility for one living as a child of God.

Adoption calls one to live a life that is in pursuit of holiness. When preaching on Ephesians chapter one, Calvin says, “But yet we must always bear in mind that God’s electing of us was in order to call us to holiness of life. For if he should let us alone still as wretched castaways, surely we could do nothing but all manner of wickedness according to the corruption that is in us.”⁷¹

He went on to say:

For we are not elected to give ourselves over to permissiveness, but to show by our deeds that God has adopted us to be children and taken us into his keeping in order to dwell in us by his Holy Spirit and to unite us to himself in all perfection of righteousness.⁷²

For Calvin, being adopted was not a “free ticket” into heaven; rather, it was a constant reminder—a constant responsibility—for believers that they are to live a life that is always pursuing holiness, until the day that they are united with their heavenly Father. Calvin believed that a person acts according to the family they are a part of... if one is Satan’s child and a part of this world, then he acts accordingly; but if one is a child of God, then he is to act like it, living every day in pursuit of the example that Christ has given.

Adoption calls one to live an indebted life. When preaching on election and adoption from his sermon on Ephesians chapter one, Calvin says, “Let us notice that in this place St. Paul exhorts us to acknowledge ourselves *indebted* to God for the virtue and goodness that is in us.”⁷³

⁷¹ Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on Ephesians*, 36-7.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 39.

Calvin saw and proclaimed the importance of knowing that as adopted children of God, believers are to live always indebted to their Father for the pure grace that He has given to them. Adopted children of God are given the rights to a heavenly family and salvation, and as adopted children, they are now owned by the Father. Because of the great grace and blessings that this adoption gave the believer, Calvin understood that everything—every move, every sound, every accomplishment, every second—is owned by God. This is clearly seen in his preaching as he ends his sermon on Ephesians 5:11-14 saying:

Now if we are so much bound to a mortal man as to maintain his honor when we are kept at his expense, what ought we to do for our God? Are we not in his house as long as we live in this world? Have we so much as one drop of water except by his goodness and generosity? Behold, God has a fatherly care over us, and yet we allow his name to be blasphemed, his majesty to be robbed and spoiled of all reverence, his Word to be torn in pieces, all order (that he has commanded) to be broken, the church (which is his wife) to be corrupted and misused, and his children to be debauched, and in the meanwhile we keep our mouths closed. I ask you, whether such silence does not sufficiently show that we are not worthy to eat one more morsel of bread, nor to be counted in the number of earthworm, lice, bugs, and all the vilest and filthiest things of the world?

Therefore let us think well upon it, that we shall be found guilty of the despising of God's majesty (as we see) because we do not rebuke men's vices. That is a reason why the wicked and profane become bolder and imagine they have won all to their side, and triumph in their despising of God in that way. It comes partly as a result of our silence.⁷⁴

Calvin saw living an indebted life, a life of duty and honor to the Father, was living a life for, to, and in the Father's blessing.

Adoption calls one to praise the Father. Towards the end of his sermon on Ephesians chapter one, Calvin speaks about faith being a fruit of election, and relates this to adoption and how all praise is due to our heavenly Father:

To be brief, it is not without reason that St. Paul says here that God's praise shall never be glorified as it ought to be till we acknowledge his election to be the cause of all the benefits he bestows upon us, and that if he had not adopted us by his infinite mercy according to his eternal counsel, we should take part of the praise to ourselves which is due to him.⁷⁵

Calvin truly understood—and wanted others to as well—that adoption is more than blessings and privileges alone. It is also more than duties and responsibilities. Adoption

⁷⁴ Ibid., 525.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 44.

into the family of God ought to cause believers to react in such a way that their heart bursts with joy and praise for what God has done for them. According to Calvin, seeing God as perfecter of man's salvation ought to bring forth a life that praises the Trinity constantly for the work that has been done in the believer's heart.

*Adoption calls one to live an obedient life in cross bearing.*⁷⁶ In his Institutes, Calvin says the following about cross bearing in the life of the adopted:

Those whom the Lord has chosen and honored with his intercourse must prepare for a hard. Laborious, troubled life, a life full of many and various kinds of evils: it being the will of our heavenly Father to exercise his people in this way while putting them to the proof. Having begun this course with Christ the first-born, he continues it towards all his children.⁷⁷

He then ends the section entitled "What the Cross Is" by saying:

How powerfully should it soften the bitterness of the cross, to think that the more we are afflicted with adversity, the surer we are made of our fellowship with Christ; by communion with whom our sufferings are not only blessed to us, but tend greatly to the furtherance of our salvation.⁷⁸

Calvin saw the importance of the believer's suffering in adoption—that is, carrying their own cross and doing so in obedience, imaging their elder brother Jesus.⁷⁹ Like a toddler looks to his older brother for guidance, this is what God's adopted do. They focus on Christ, their Elder Brother, for guidance in living as co-heirs with Him. As one is to live as co-heir with Christ, Calvin understood that this involved looking at what Christ had done at the cross. In Christ's suffering one is given an example for life.

Adoption calls one to live a life that desires the third use of the Law. It would be unthinkable to write a paper on John Calvin's view of the duties and responsibilities of adoption, without making mention of his view on the third use of the Law. Dr. Timothy Trumper expresses this best as he makes mention of this exact issue in the beginning section about obedience of his dissertation. It states:

⁷⁶ Trumper, "An Historic Study of the Doctrine of Adoption in the Calvinistic Tradition," 199-202.

⁷⁷ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.8.1.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.8.1.

⁷⁹ Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries on Romans*, 318.

Ever since God revealed himself father to us,” says Calvin, “we must prove our ungratefulness to him if we did not in turn show ourselves as sons. (Mal. 1:6; Eph. 5:1; 1 John 3:1)⁸⁰ Gratitude is therefore registered by obedience to the Father’s will.⁸¹

Calvin saw that the Law aids the adopted in the process of sanctification. It is the duty of the sons and daughters of God to live in obedience to the Law in order to continually present themselves as His children.

Calvin states on the third use of the Law in the *Institutes*:

The third use of the Law has respect to believers in whose hearts with the Spirit of God already flourishes and reigns... For it is the best instrument for the enabling them daily to learn with greater truth and certainty what that will of the Lord is which they aspire to follow, and to confirm them in this knowledge; just as a servant who desires with all his soul to approve himself to his master, must still observe, and be careful to ascertain his master’s dispositions, that he may comport himself in accommodation to them.⁸²

Elsewhere in the *Institutes*, Calvin shows that the Law helps develop obedience to the Father.⁸³ However, the best chapter for a further study on John Calvin’s view of obedience in relationship to the third use of the Law in relation to the doctrine of adoption is once more from Timothy Trumper’s dissertation.⁸⁴

Adoption calls one to live a life of humility. I cannot think of any other way to end, than Calvin’s own concluding thoughts from his only sermon ever preached on the doctrine of adoption, from Galatians 4:4-7 in which he says:

Now let us fall before the presence of our great God, acknowledging our sins, and praying that he would make us aware of them so that we *humble ourselves before him*. At the same time, let us not lose courage, since he accepts us, willingly designs to listen to our petitions when we come to him in complete trust. May he grant us grace to overcome all problems and hindrances, and all the arguments and questions that the devil sets our hearts, that we may know the truth of that promises, that whoever calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. Thus, we all say, Almighty God, and our *heavenly Father*.⁸⁵

⁸⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.6.3.

⁸¹ Trumper, “An Historic Study of the Doctrine of Adoption in the Calvinistic Tradition.” 190.

⁸² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.7.12.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 2.8.5; 3.8.9.

⁸⁴ Cf. For John Calvin’s view of *Obedience* and the third use of the Law in relation to the doctrine of Adoption, Timothy Trumper, “An Historic Study of the Doctrine of Adoption in the Calvinistic Tradition,” 190-202.

⁸⁵ Calvin, *John Calvin’s Sermons on Galatians*, 384.

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