

The Christian Doctrine of Adoption

By Peter Gray

Part 1 - Background On The Term 'Adoption'

The term 'adoption' refers to a relationship that is not natural, but a change in families by a child, through a legal declaration. Though there is undeniably a legal aspect to adoption, it is clear that it is the desire to adopt that is the motivating and underlying factor. It is the desire to adopt a child into one's family that creates the necessity for the legalities to be dealt with. We must not reverse this.

The Christian doctrine of adoption presupposes that we are not naturally a part of God's family, and that we must be adopted into that family by the action of God. The highest privilege that can be bestowed on a person is to be adopted into God's family.

Even though the notion that we humans should be given the legal rights and privileges of the family of God is amazing enough, it is merely the beginning. The Christian notion of adoption means to be transformed into 'at-oneness' and union with Him. It means to be taken into and included in the very fellowship of the Trinity. In our adoption, we are given to participate in God's actual life, sharing in His fullness and glory. We share not just legal rights and privileges, but life itself. (Kruger, 1995: 9)

In our adoption, not only is our legal status altered, but we are forgiven and reconciled. We are the recipient's of God's Fatherly care. We experience the Father's goodwill. It is one thing to be pardoned, but our adoption is not only this. "He is ours and we are his, and he, through adoption, extends to us all the benefits his measureless love can bestow." (Erickson, 1996: 964). Adoption is not merely retrospective (meaning backwards facing), as wonderful as that is, but it is also prospective (meaning forwards facing). (Campbell, 1996: 138). This is to say that not only are our sins removed, but we are also then truly given new life. To use an Old Testament analogy, we are not only released from slavery in Egypt (retrospective), but we are also delivered into the Promised Land (prospective). (Campbell, 1996: 114, 127)

The doctrine of adoption is an extraordinary manifestation of God's mercy and love to his people. Surprisingly, very little has been written on this doctrine throughout church history. Even after the reformation, Luther had little to say about adoption, and Calvin ignored it almost entirely. In order to understand why this is, we will need to view it in the context of the prevailing theologies. This will be dealt with in later sections.

Part 2 - What Is The Importance Of The Doctrine Of Adoption In Our Understanding Of Salvation?

The short answer to the question of the importance of the doctrine of adoption, is as uncomplicated as it is profound, and it is simply this; that the adoption of humanity is the eternal purpose of God. (Eph. 1:3-6). With the thought in mind that adopting us

into His family, is God's primary will or focus, it must therefore become our primary focus. It is unavoidable, no matter how we try not to, for us to bring pre-conceived ideas into our attempts at biblical interpretation. I call these ideas 'baggage', and though we do our best to 'leave our baggage at the door', it appears to be too difficult to achieve. I contend, therefore, that rather than attempting the apparently impossible, we should instead seek a viable and even helpful alternative. The alternative that I suggest, is instead of attempting not to bring any baggage, we should rather ensure that the we are carrying the correct baggage. I suggest that the correct baggage would be to take seriously the person and work of Jesus Christ. Beginning with three assumptions, firstly that our adoption is God's eternal will for us, secondly that Jesus Christ was sent into the world to secure our adoption and finally that Christ achieved this goal, the doctrine of adoption becomes foundational to understanding our salvation.

J. I. Packer argues that the entire Christian life should be understood in terms of adoption. He writes: "Sonship must be the controlling thought - the normative category, if you like - at every point. This follows from the nature of the case, and is strikingly confirmed by the fact that our Lord's teaching on Christian discipleship is cast in these terms." (Packer, 1975: 190).

Understanding that in our salvation we are adopted into God's family and enjoy a Father-child relationship with God is foundational for Christian living. One passage in Scripture dealing with the doctrine of adoption is found in Romans 8:15-16: "For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba, Father!' The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." This passage affirms the idea that, in our salvation, we are adopted into God's family as an act of his grace. It also affirms that the believer enjoys a close filial relationship with God as his Father. The Aramaic, "Abba" is a term of close relationship. John Powell describes "Abba" as conjuring up an image of a baby sleeping in his father's arms, who wakes up, looks into his father's eyes, realises he is safe in his father's grasp and snuggles back down to sleep, safe and secure. (Powell, audio: No Date). If, as a parent, you have experienced this, you will understand the magnificent portrait of God that Powell is attempting to paint. Keeping adoption close to the centre of our interpretive world, helps us to see this vision of God.

Many books on Christian doctrine, treat adoption as a sub-category or footnote of justification, but this is inadequate. The two ideas are linked, yet distinct, and adoption is the more exalted. Justification, when separated from adoption, becomes a forensic idea; it has a legal foundation and views God as judge...it does not imply any intimate or deep relationship with God the judge. You have the possibility of justification without any close fellowship with God. "But contrast this, now, with adoption. Adoption is a family idea, conceived in terms of love, and viewing God as father. In adoption, God takes us into His family and fellowship, and establishes us as His children and heirs. Closeness, affection and generosity are at the heart of the relationship. To be right with God the judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater." (Packer, 1975:187-188).

As long as adoption is central to our interpretive process, the Gospel cannot be seen in legal terms. Adoption is far greater than any law. But if adoption, relationship and

Trinitarian thought are allowed to be displaced from this central point, we are then at risk of losing the vision of God as our loving Abba. We then view Him as a God who is more interested in rules than relationship, and interpret our salvation legally and not relationally. This leads us into the next section.

Part Three - Why Has The Doctrine Of Adoption Been So Neglected?

In order to set the context inside of which the doctrine of adoption has been marginalised or neglected, we need to understand the theological emphasis of some of our most influential thinkers. Three points need to be made here; 1) In no way do I propose that these men are solely to blame for the loss of the doctrine of adoption, 2) the list is by no means exhaustive, and those men I will discuss, will be mentioned only briefly and 3) whilst I am pointing out how the theology of these men contributed to the loss of the doctrine of adoption, I do not wish to imply that they have not had a positive impact on Christian thought in other areas. The sole purpose of this part of the discussion is to set a framework or matrix from which we can understand the loss of the doctrine of adoption.

The early Western church was heavily influenced by a man named Tertullian (160-240 AD). Latin was the language used for law and military and as Tertullian was a lawyer, this was the language used by him. Due to this, he wrote with a legal mindset, and as such the western understanding of the Gospel developed a legal foundation. Talking about salvation, words like justification, sanctification and atonement were developed. (Worthing, 2002). He held to a very legalistic and rigorous view of sin and forgiveness, and also condemned any attempt to marry Christian doctrine with Stoic or Platonic thought.

Following on from Tertullian, and embracing his legal understanding, came St. Augustine (354-430 AD), the most influential theologian of the time. He re-established and promoted, albeit inadvertently, the Arian dichotomy between the divine realm and the created realm. "Augustine always understood the Christian commandment of obedient love to God, and the total surrender of his own self, as a demand to overcome the lower world and its sensuality altogether, and to rise to the spiritual realm of eternal and pure being." (Lucas, 1998: 3). His classic book *City of God*, which contained his dualistic theology, was the most read book of the Medieval period. Due to its widespread influence, there followed a "...devilish devaluation of the secular and a sanctification of the ecclesiastical, thus further reinforcing this sacred and secular dichotomy which came to be built into the whole fabric of western thought." (Lucas, 1998: 3)

Augustine adopted the philosophy of Plato, and is responsible for marrying neo-platonic thought together with Christian doctrine. (Erickson, 1996: 41). Thus, both platonic dualism and deism, is inherent in Augustine's view of Christianity. Deism is an extreme view that believes that God is a distant force, far removed from humanity. It is one side of the pendulum swing, so to speak. The other side is Pantheism, which has God so closely linked to humanity, that we cease to exist as individuals. Christianity walks us between the two extremes. This deism and dualism, along with his dominant theme of the total sovereignty of God, and the focus on God's holiness and the ensuing problem of sin, overtook any thought of a Trinitarian and

Incarnational approach to the understanding of Christianity. (Lucas, 1998: 3). His theology has remained central to Western Christianity, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, ever since.

In John Calvin (1509-1564), over one millennium on from Augustine, we have basically the same views repackaged and extended, but he is perhaps most famous for his doctrine of pre-destination. Like Augustine, Calvin centralised God's holiness and man's depravity, and the complete sovereignty of God. Beginning with these premises, Calvin concluded that salvation is in the hands of God and God alone, and man can do nothing to appropriate his own personal salvation. Combining this conclusion with his observations that not all people live the Christian life, Calvin was left (he believed) with no alternative but to conclude that God had elected or pre-destined some people to salvation or life, and some to death. Even though Calvin himself thought this was a 'horrible decree', he nevertheless held it to be true. (Erickson, 1996: 915-917).

On this topic, Calvin wrote these words; "By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death..." (Calvin, 1989: 5). He goes on to say that God "...determined once for all those whom it was his pleasure one day to admit to salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, it was his pleasure to doom to destruction." (Calvin, 1989: 7)

Opposing Calvin's views on election, was Jacob Arminius (1560-1609). Where Calvin rested salvation solely upon the grace of the sovereign God, Arminius put the emphasis onto the individual. According to Calvin, Jesus died only for some, but with Arminius, Jesus died for all. Yet not all will receive the benefits, and it is up to the individual to appropriate those benefits for himself. (Erickson, 1996: 919).

Rene Descartes (1596-1650 AD), was a theist, and his philosophy made a radical separation between matter and spirit, between the mind and the body. While this dualistic thought can be traced back to a Greek mindset, it is the seminal work of the French mathematician, philosopher and physiologist, that brought about its widespread modern popularity. (James, online: 2002).

Isaac Newton (1643-1727), feared that the work of Descartes would undermine all religious belief. "Newton, of course, was an Anglican and a very religious man. In fact, his work was throughout an attempt to secure and defend the Divine ordering of the world." (Lucas, 1998: 5). He was one of the greatest scientists of all time and his influence upon the western world is incalculable. Unfortunately, his theology was very deistic. He did not believe in the Trinity at all, and held a view of God as a distant Unitarian being, responsible for designing and building the great machine called 'the universe'. (Lucas, 1998: 6) Newton saw the world as an intricate machine, that God had designed, built and set in motion. Once it was set in motion, God then stepped away from His creation. (Lucas, 1998: 6).

In summary, while there is divergent thought in the above theologians, common to all of their thought, is a legal view of God's holiness. The doctrine of Christian adoption

has been lost due to the removal of the Trinity and relationship, as what is fundamental about God, and the subsequent insertion of legal holiness to the central point. Now, the holiness of God, properly understood, is simply beautiful. It describes the wonder and the beauty, the glory and the love, the relationship and rightness, of the Trinitarian life. But the holiness of God has become detached from the Trinity, and has been re-invented inside the legal Latin mindset. Holiness was then redefined to mean 'legal or moral perfection'. When this notion of holiness was substituted in the place of the Trinity, as the fundamental, deepest truth about God, the logic of the universe changed, and with it the logic of the Incarnation and crucifixion. (Kruger, 2000: 25)

Beginning with the two statements, firstly that God is holy (legalistically), and secondly, that humanity has sinned, we therefore conclude that humanity is liable to punishment. It is to this end that Jesus Christ comes to earth; to take that punishment in our place. He comes to satisfy the justice and holiness of God. God's justice is satisfied on the cross, and God is now able to forgive us. Much has gone wrong with this understanding of the Gospel. Firstly, we have lost the vision of Father, Son and Spirit reaching out to share the life they have, with us. Instead we have a 'divine legalist' more interested in perfectionism than personhood, brimming with anger at his disobedient creation, and a Jesus who comes to die to placate this angry God. (Kruger, 2000: 26)

Secondly, the cross, or the death of Jesus Christ, becomes all significant, and not Jesus Christ Himself. Building on the previous paragraph, what is of fundamental importance in the legal model of Christianity, is that Jesus Christ died in our place. In suffering our penalty, he repaired the legal problem that existed between God and humanity. Now that He has achieved that, Jesus ceases to be of any real and practical value. But Jesus Christ is God incarnate. He is God and man. In Him, Divine and human are forever united. "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together." (Col 1:17). He will forever be the way in which the Trinitarian life is mediated to us. As such, He will always be the centre of the universe. Jesus Christ is central, not merely His death. (Kruger, 2000: 26)

Thirdly, and of most significance to this paper, is that justification has been over emphasised, and has replaced adoption as the heart of the Christian message. The central Christian truth has become our sin and God's forgiveness of us. Of course, forgiveness is an integral part of the Gospel, but it is not the Gospel itself. It is not that forgiveness is the end of the story, rather it is just the beginning. Forgiveness is something that we are given in order for us to be included in the life of the Trinity. Adoption is not a by-product of forgiveness; forgiveness serves the much higher purpose of adoption. (Kruger, 2000: 27)

Part Four - The Incarnation

This final section of the paper will examine the significance of the Incarnation within the context of the doctrine of adoption, with a particular focus upon the vicarious nature of Christ's humanity.

The first point to make is that Christ is both fully God and fully human. As only God can save, we are only saved if Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son, is true God from true God; but it is also true that in order to touch our human existence and condition he also has to be truly human. The Gospel message makes clear that Christ embodies both elements in Himself: the personal presence and activity of God in His human actuality. (Pratz, online: 2002). This is what Athanasius fought so hard for at the council of Nicea (325 AD), against the heretic, Arius, who suggested that Jesus was not God, but the first created being. (Worthing, 2002)

It is an unfortunate consequence of the legal view of the Gospel, that we become so focused on Easter, that we miss the significance of Christmas altogether. Western theology has taken the view, that the Incarnation is to be viewed as God's answer to human alienation, thus the centre of attention is the atoning death of Christ. The only significance of the Incarnation then, is that it births the One who must die. Some of the early Greek fathers did not agree. They put emphasis on the Incarnation itself, tending to regard the death of Christ as an event (though a most important one) of the Incarnate life. "By the very act of becoming flesh Christ redeemed the flesh...and brought immortality to mankind." (Tuttle, 1986: 83)

In this way, early Christianity viewed the Incarnation not as a means by which to bring Atonement to pass, but instead they saw that the Incarnation and the Atonement are one and the same. "In Him the Incarnation and Atonement are one and inseparable, for atoning reconciliation falls within the incarnate constitution of his Person as Mediator." (Torrance, 1983: 73).

When discussing the atonement, most theologians take as a starting point, a particular idea of God, and then speculate on what such a God would require of humanity. Many begin with the notion that 'God is love', and in that love He sent Jesus to die on our behalf to enable our forgiveness, and win us back. In this view, the emphasis is upon the subjective change effected in us by the work of Christ. Others begin with the view that 'God is righteous', and in that righteousness, there is a requirement for righteousness in humanity. Our failure to fulfill this demand creates the necessity of the atonement, as the demand for righteousness must be satisfied before any reconciliation can be effected. While both of these contain truth, they are not complete. The correct starting point for the discussion on atonement, is Jesus Christ. We must view the atonement in the light of Christ. (Tuttle, 1986: 76-78).

Western theology has mainly emphasised the Godward side of the atonement. Beginning with two premises, firstly, that sin is an offence against God, and secondly, that God could not ignore the offence without denying himself, the conclusion is that sin brings humanity under condemnation and issues forth the wrath of God. "The problem of reconciliation, therefore, was thought to involve some kind of redress, an act of atonement in the sense of a price paid to restore humankind to God's favour." (Tuttle, 1986: 93). The depravity of sinners and the helplessness of humanity meant that they were unable to offer a sufficient atonement, and so God provided the means of atonement in his son, Jesus Christ. "God was thereby satisfied, and was 'freed up' so to speak, to forgive." (Tuttle, 1986: 94). We need, however, to keep focused on Jesus and God's eternal purpose for humanity. We can then see that the Incarnation and Atonement serve the purpose of adoption. God does not need to be convinced to forgive us. He wants us to be in His family, and He sets about making it so.

Critical to our understanding of adoption, is the view of Christ as the vicarious man. From the legal viewpoint, Christ's vicarious nature is of no relevance to the Incarnation. All that matters is that Christ took the punishment that we deserved. From the viewpoint of adoption, however, Christ's vicarious humanity is of utmost importance. As God delights to bring us into His family, He did not wish to leave the details up to us, but instead He sent Christ to make it so. What God requires of us, He provides Christ to do on our behalf. John McLeod Campbell recognised the inability of humanity to offer an adequate repentance, but he also recognised that Jesus Christ stands in our place, as the vicarious man, doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. (Tuttle, 1986: 94). Karl Barth also saw this vicarious humanity. He writes; "In this one man, God sees every man, all of us, as through a glass...Before His eyes from eternity God keeps men, each man, in Him, in this One; and not only before His eyes, but loved and elect and called and made His possession. In Him, He has from all eternity bound Himself to each, to all." (Barth, 1966: 91)

This is the heart of the New Testament and the heart of the Incarnation. Grace not only means God giving himself in love to man through Jesus Christ, it also means the coming of God as man in order to do for us, what we are not capable of doing for ourselves. In particular, he presents us, inside of himself, to the Father. (Torrance, 1981: 141). The very centre of the New Testament is not our religion or our faith or anything else we do. Instead, the centre is the relationship between Father and Son. The Son who joins Himself to all of humanity, and presents Himself to the Father, in our humanity and in our place. (Torrance, 1996: 19).

The vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ is foreshadowed in the Old Testament, as we notice that face to face with God, is not the individual Jew, but the collective nation of Israel. What we think of regarding Christianity, is a group of individual people each one making his/her own terms with God, by faith. But we must reject any notion that reduces the atonement to God dealing with a mass of individuals, rather than with humanity as one whole. We seem to think that in conversion, each individual makes their own peace with God, so that the work of Christ becomes nothing more than a change of attitude or feeling between God and man, but this is not the New Testament idea. (Forsyth, 1965: 96-110).

God "...was not trying, not taking steps to provide means of reconciliation, not opening doors of reconciliation if we would only walk in at them, not labouring toward reconciliation...but 'God was in Christ reconciling' actually reconciling, finishing the work. It was not a tentative, preliminary affair. Reconciliation was finished in Christ's death. Paul did not preach a gradual reconciliation. He preached what the old divines used to call the finished work. He did not preach a gradual reconciliation that was to become the reconciliation of the world only piecemeal, as men were induced to accept it, or were affected by the gospel. He preached something once for all - a reconciliation which is the base of every soul's reconcilment, not an invitation only." (Forsyth, 1965: 90)

The Incarnation is thus securing our adoption, it is not just the removal of sin by crucifixion. Jesus Christ was not just a man born to die in our place, He was a man born to live in our place. "He was the Word of God brought to bear upon man, but He was also man hearing that Word, answering it, trusting it, living by it - by faith. He

was the great believer - vicariously believing in our place and in our name."
(Torrance, 1960: 233)

In the Incarnation, the whole of mankind becomes one man in Christ's manhood, so that in Jesus Christ all of humanity is already united with God. (Walgrave, 1981: 161-162). This is the understanding of Karl Barth regarding election/pre-destination. The truth, he said, is neither Calvinistic or Arminian. He takes his regular Christological focus to this debate and says that Jesus Christ is the elect one. (Barth, 1957: 161). But Christ has not been chosen as an isolated individual, rather, the entire human race has been chosen in Him. (Barth, 1957: 229). Barth is promoting universal election, not universalism. While all are elected, and all have had their adoption secured by the work of Christ, not all live according to their true nature. For Barth, the difference between believer and unbeliever is not a tangible one or one of reality, for all have been elected. The difference is that one group has realised they are elected and adopted, and as such live in that light; the other group have not realised it, and so live in the dark. (Barth, 1957: 350).

Conclusion

The eternal purpose of the Father is to unite Himself with humanity, and share the riches of His life, with all of His creation. We must always keep this truth, along with Jesus Christ, at the very centre of our theological thought process. If we substitute anything else, we will lose the magnificent image of God as our tender, loving Father, and we as His beloved children. It is a vision that has been lost over the years due to the fact that adoption, Trinity and relationship, have been replaced by a legal understanding of holiness, as what is fundamental about God. It is in the Incarnation that God brought His plan to pass. The coming of Christ was a two-sided mission. Firstly, Christ entered into our existence, and brought with Him the Divine life. He opened up the life of the Trinity and drew us into it. Secondly, He stood in our shoes and did for us what we could not do. He came to earth to secure our adoption and guarantee our place in His family and in His life, and that's exactly what He did; for all of us. What He can't guarantee is our enjoyment of that life. He cannot ensure that we will acknowledge our place in His family and live accordingly, for these things are our choice. But make no mistake, Christ drew the entire human race to Himself, and now He shares His life with us all. "Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men." (Romans 5:18). To put that another way, whatever connection existed between humanity and Adam that saw him bring us death, that same connection exists now between humanity and Jesus; a connection that no longer brings us Adam's death, but Jesus Christ's life. The church doesn't need to tell people to get themselves connected with Jesus. This has been accomplished, and not by anything we have done. All the church needs to do, is tell people the ridiculously good news that if only they will open their eyes and look toward Christ, the darkness will be gone. And it will be gone, not because their faith created something that caused it to leave, no - it will be gone precisely because, apart from the blindness of unbelief, it was never there in the first place. (Capon, 2000: 65)

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