

## WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH XII

*(Reading: Gal.3:26-4:7; I John 2:28-3:10)*

### Where You're In The Most Special Place!

There's a first here! The Westminster Confession in this Chapter uniquely develops an added scriptural teaching. This is because you won't find 'Adoption' as a distinct subject in any of the reformed confessions before this. At most it is alluded to in the section on justification. Yet adoption is as much a benefit coming out of God's calling as is justification and sanctification. It supplements those two. It rounds off what Scriptures tells us about the benefits which are now ours.

#### Adoption Comes As Part of God's Calling

So let's see where this comes from. And especially let's see what this means. This means we note, in the first place, that, **ADOPTION COMES AS PART OF GOD'S CALLING.**

Adoption is when we become part of a family which we weren't part of. The Oxford Dictionary says it is to "legally take another's child and bring it up as one's own."

While there are fewer adoptions these days, some are still able to adopt children, particularly from overseas. Perhaps that was because they had no children. Maybe they believed they could have more children.

Whatever the reason, they wanted that child to be in their family. There may well be those among us who have been adopted into these families.

So we are familiar with what an adoption is. And when we look at it spiritually this becomes, as John Murray says, "an act of transfer from an alien family into the family of God himself."

An alien family means it is a foreign family. It's from a whole different background altogether! Those who were by nature children of wrath, children of darkness, and even children of Satan, become the children of light and of God. Ephesians 2, Colossians 3, and John 8, clearly show that. There couldn't be a greater change!

But, having seen what adoption is, we have to realise who does it. Because the one being adopted here has no say in it. And that's consistent with how adoption has been seen through the ages. For it's an act where someone unable to look after themselves becomes put in the place where they'll receive what they need.

That's where the picture of the "family" comes in. This is a picture we saw the apostle Paul draw out in Galatians chapter 4. But it's especially another apostle, John, who brings out its fullest meaning.

Here it's handy to compare 'justification' with 'adoption'. Because what picture do we see in justification? Isn't it a court of law where a prisoner stands charged with an offence?

The verdict is announced: "Not guilty." And the prisoner is discharged.

Adoption gives us the picture of a family. An orphaned child, lost in the world and without hope in the world - poor, hungry, and cold - is brought into a family. The door's opened. The child comes in and is surrounded with loving care.

So we can say 'justification' is about our responsibility to God and how God deals with our failure to fulfil it. Adoption is about our broken relationship to God and God's way of restoring it. That's why when this Article says that adoption is "in and for His only Son Jesus Christ" we confess that it's through Him who is the Son by nature that we are enabled to become sons by

adoption. You see, originally we were sons in God's house. In Luke 3 verse 37 Adam is called the son of God. He was an heir of the future held out to him in the Garden of Eden.

Thus the relationship he had with the Lord was much more privileged than what a citizen or servant has with his ruler or master. It actually showed something of the relation between God the Father and God the Son. Which means that, because of his sin, man loses his right as a citizen and also as a son. Man became a rebel. He needs to be changed within. Then he has his citizenship and sonship restored. And so you have regeneration, justification, and adoption.

This was shown by an incident in the life of Thomas Boston. One night he was walking up and down in his study. He was quite depressed at that point.

Then his little daughter, who he had already tucked up in bed, came to him. Somehow she must have sensed her father's despair. She had picked up that he was doubting where he stood with the Lord. She said to her Dad, "Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. She went back again with them to the tomb; but they would not believe that Christ was risen till Mary Magdalene met Him; and He said to her, 'Tell my brethren, they are my brethren yet.'" (John 20:17)

"This," says Boston, "she said with a certain air of sweetness. 'It took me by the heart. 'His brethren yet' (I thought), and may I think that Christ will own me as one of His brethren yet? It was to me as life from the dead.'"

At that moment Boston was struck that he was, in the words of Chapter 12, "a partaker of the grace of adoption." He saw so clearly this benefit of God's effective calling. And so he knew that ADOPTION IS BEING JOINED TO GOD'S FAMILY.

### **Adoption Is Being Joined To God's Family**

This is the second aspect we take from this Article. This is what the Westminster goes on to expound from the third line down. After speaking of God's calling through being taken into the number of the elect we confess that through adoption we enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God.

What it is to be joined to God's family is described here. Those liberties and privileges show the legal status we now have. Just like in an earthly adoption the child becomes no less than anyone else in that family.

It then says that we have His name put upon us. Again, just like in an earthly adoption a child is given a completely different surname that's what we have now "in Christ".

That's what we believe baptism symbolically shows. God the Father there calls you His child. So you have a name different than the name you have as part of the human family.

And next Chapter 12 says we receive the spirit of adoption. This sonship comes alive in being a spiritual son. So we pray. We have access to the throne of grace, and we can do that with boldness. We cry out, "Abba, Father."

Wasn't this so vividly pictured in Paul's words to the Galatians? As he wrote to them of the marvellous work of God in Christ to the Jews and the Gentiles, he used this picture in chapter 4 of being joined to God's family. You see, then "Abba" was the child's first words. It's "Dad-da" to us today.

Being adopted means that you're just as much part of that family as any natural children. You have the same access to the rights and privileges that they have. And that's what we show when from our hearts we cry out, "Abba, Father". We confess who we know. We show where we belong.

The apostle John brings it home even more. In his first letter chapter 3 he can't hold back on how privileged he is being in God's family. This is why in verse 1 there he says, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that's what we are!"

### **Adoption Shows You Are God's Child**

He can't hold himself back. And he's not allowed to. For, in the third place, ADOPTION SHOWS YOU ARE GOD'S CHILD.

What we have just seen are the favours in adoption. But being a child in a family also means you come under its discipline. That's why we confess that like a father, God has compassion on, protects, provides for, and chastens us.

Just as it has become quite evident in our society about how important physical fathers are in the life of children, here we see the ultimate value of having the heavenly Father being involved with us. And it's here where Christians have been deprived as much spiritually as our society has missed out physically. Because the only heavenly Father many so-called Christians know is Father Christmas! You know, the kindly old man who never says an angry word, who makes no judgements, and who always gives you your present anyway. That's the kind of God they preach about in many churches today. He always forgives but never punishes!

The effect of adoption has to be a meaningful dialogue with God, however. This is a real relationship. As Hebrews 12 verse 6 says, "the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

Verse 7 puts it even more clearly. "For what son is not disciplined by his Father?" it asks. And verse 8 adds, "If you are not disciplined then you are illegitimate children and not true sons."

Now, we may not always see this. As children we didn't always see the way our parents treated us as being fair. But how much didn't their involvement in our lives make all the difference for where we are today?

You see, there has been a tendency in Protestant theology, especially in the Lutheran Church, to lean too heavily on the doctrine of justification. We see that in the error of antinomianism where it's believed that once you're saved that's it. Then you've "arrived".

But then we have only really just begun. Adoption shows how it's only at that point you've started speaking the Father's name. When God extends His grace to us in Jesus Christ, He not only releases us from our guilt, He also receives us into His family. To take the one away from the other is to get things out of kilter, as indeed we're seeing in much of Christianity today. And we've actually hardly begun realising the benefits of His calling us! But do that we must do!

This is what a story from Ireland illustrates. For there was Roman Catholic priest there who took his Scriptures very seriously. Unlike many of his colleagues, he was a strong supporter of children going to school to study the Bible.

One day he met one of the students going to school. He asked him which book he had under his arm. "It is a will, sir" said the boy. "What will?" replied the priest. "The last will and Testament that Jesus Christ left to me, and to all who desire to claim a title in the property herein bequeathed," the boy answered.

"What did Christ leave you in that will?" "A kingdom, sir." "Where does the kingdom lie?" "It is the kingdom of heaven, sir." "And do you expect to reign as a king there?" "Yes, sir; as joint heir with Christ."

"And won't every person get there as well as you?" "No, sir; none can get there but those who claim their title to that kingdom upon the ground of the will."

The priest asked other questions, which the boy also answered so well he was quite amazed. He said, "Indeed, you are a good little boy; take care of the book wherein God gives you such precious promises; believe what He has said, and you will be happy here and hereafter." That's the truth of adoption, congregation. It is the most precious privilege! And it's by living out what it means that we realise what a grace this adoption is.

The apostle Peter began his first letter to the churches very much in this vein. In the verses 3 and 4 of chapter 1, he cries out, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade - kept in heaven for you."

That's "Abba, Father!" That the spirit of adoption in one of God's sons!

Dear friend, is that what you call out – night and day? Is this how you pray?