

Study Seven

CALLED CHILDREN OF GOD

Paul says believers are called into the fellowship of his Son (I Corin. 1:9) and that in union with Christ, they are all sons of God (Gal. 3:26). It can be appreciated that if one is united with him who is son, this identity and status belong to the one so united. Those called by God are named (or called) 'sons of the living God' (Rom. 9:24–26), or 'children of God' (I John 3:1; cf. John 1:12).

We should remind ourselves that when God names a person, or calls them something, he does so authoritatively. Hosea's children were called 'Not pitied' and 'Not my people', because that is how it would be with the children of Israel. God named his Son 'Jesus' because he would save his people from their sins (Matthew 1:21; Jesus, means 'to help', or 'to save'). Simon was named 'Peter', meaning rock, and referring to his place as part of the foundation on which the church would be built. Therefore, to be named a child or son of God is to authoritatively receive that status. (cf. Eph. 1:5, destined . . . to be sons).

ISRAEL AND THE GENTILES

The nation of Israel was referred to, by the Lord, as his son. He asked Pharaoh to let Israel his first-born son go, or his own first-born would die (Exod. 4:22f.). Thereafter, the Lord carried Israel as a man carries his son (Deut. 1:31). But this son (or sons) rebelled (Isa. 1:2, 4). From this, it can be seen that the parables Jesus told concerning fathers and sons would have special relevance to his Jewish listeners. (Matt. 21:28–32; Luke 15:11–32).

However, the faithful in Israel still called on God as Father (Isa. 63:16; 64:8) and prophecies hailed the day when the true Israel would be known as 'sons of the living God' (Hosea 1:10).

But the prophecies also showed that sonship would focus in a king (Ps. 2:1–9) of the line of David, who himself prophetically called on God as Father (Ps. 89:26, i.e. not in virtue of his own person, but in view of what was promised to his line) and whose immediate son (Solomon) was called a son of God (I Chron. 17:11–13, 22:10).

The latter part of Isaiah's prophecy shows, in parallel fashion, how the servant role of Israel would be focussed in one suffering servant (Isa. 49:1–7). This suggests that the sonship of Israel (in its functional aspect) would also be focussed in its Messiah.

So within Israel's history there is a focussing of all her identity and interests and obligations, in the coming Messiah—servant, and this person cannot be other than a son. Therefore, when Jesus came, he was the Son of God, not only essentially and eternally, but expressed functionally and historically in

time as the sole representative of the nation son. The many children become the child, whom God calls out of Egypt (Hosea 11:1 with Matt. 2:15), and the destiny of Israel lies in the destiny of its representative. To Israel had belonged the sonship, but now, of their race, comes the Messiah (Rom. 9:4f.) and he is the son (Psalm. 2:2, 6—the anointed one is the Messiah). This is eternal Sonship displayed in flesh (John 1:14) so that it can be understood by men (I John 1:1–4), and be effective among men (Rom. 8:3f.) and incredibly, lived by men (Rom. 8:14–17). There is no other than this incarnated sonship in which to live.

SONS BROUGHT TO REDEMPTION BY A SON

Jesus said that no-one knew the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chose to reveal him (Luke 10:22; also Matt. 11:27). If the objective God has in mind is that he should have many sons, it is understandable that the revelation, and the reconciliation should come about by a son. God has spoken in these last days by a son (Heb. 1:2).

This son entered into life as a true son, but saw where all the other prodigal sons were, entered into their suffering and death, and so brings many sons to glory. (Heb. 2:10–13, 5:8f.). He so identified with that suffering and death, that he can say he has the same origin as the other sons, and is not ashamed to call them brothers. He played the true role of an eldest son by being faithful over God's house, namely, the believers, acting responsibly in regard to what he found. (Heb. 3:6).

In one sense, believers are the offspring of the Son. He is the everlasting Father who sees his seed (Isa. 9:6, 53:10) and gathers his own as a hen her chicks.

SHARING THE SON'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FATHER—BY THE SPIRIT

All sonship is in the Son. One could say there is only one sonship; the sonship which Christ lived out as man. He lived perfectly as a son doing those things that pleased the Father (Matt. 17:5), always referring familiarly to God calling him 'Father', which in Aramaic would have been 'Abba'. (Matt. 11:25, 16:27, 18:10, 26:39; Mark 14:36; John 5:18—except when on the cross). The Father loved the Son, giving all things into his hands (John 3:35) and showing him all that he was doing (John 5:20).

The sonship of Christ always remains unique. No man has ever seen God, but Christ came from the bosom of the Father (John 1:18). However, the sonship which he displayed as Messiah, and in which he fulfilled all that Israel was called to be and anticipated all that the Church is intended to be, is the sonship into which believers are gathered. He is the beloved Son (Matt. 3:17), and we are sons of God in the Beloved (Eph. 1:5f.). The Spirit of the Son is sent into our hearts crying 'Abba Father' (Rom. 8:16; Gal. 4:6), the same cry that came from Jesus to the Father (Mark 14:36).

Therefore, sonship does not manifest a spirit of fear or condemnation (II Tim. 1:7; I John 4:18f.) but a spirit of love, power, and self-control, arising from a knowledge of acceptance in the kingdom of the Son (Col. 1:13). This spirit is not only a spirit of familiarity but of obedience. Those who have the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus, walk in the Spirit and are led by the Spirit (Rom. 8:2, 4, 14).

Jesus said that slaves, that is, those whom the law showed to be in bondage to sin, could not continue forever (John 8:31–36). Such imperfect belonging to the covenant people of God would have to be temporary. But when the Son came, living out perfect sonship, he would abide forever. Those being freed by the Son would therefore be free indeed. They would be free to do the will of their Father. Paul says that those who are freed from the law's condemnation are sons, with the Spirit of the Son in their hearts (Gal. 4:4–7).

Hosea's prophecy that Israel would one day be truly sons of the living God (Hosea 1:10) is fulfilled in the New Testament, but not in any nationalistic way. John the Baptist warned the nation not to presume on their identity because God could raise up sons for Abraham from stones (Matt. 3:9). Later the apostle John notes that Jesus would die not only for the nation 'but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad'(John 11:52). So Paul saw that the prophecy of Hosea was fulfilled by Gentiles being welcomed as sons (Rom. 9:24–26), that only a remnant of Israel were truly sons (vss. 27–29), because it is not the children in a fleshly sense who are children but those who are born of the Spirit (Rom. 9:8; Gal. 4:28; cf. John 1:13).

CHILDREN AND SONS

Although generally, childhood and sonship in regard to God are seen as one thing (Rom. 8:15f.) they are contrasted in Galatians in order to show the development from Old Testament to New Testament sonship. Old Testament sonship was based on the promise of blessings yet to come (Gal. 3:18) and was under the custodianship of law so that all the sons, knowing their sins, might be ready for the sonship of faith in Christ (3:19–4:7).

ADOPTION AND BIRTH

The word 'adoption' is used in the same manner as 'sonship' (Rom. 8:15, 9:4; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5—RSV often translates it as 'sonship') and so does not imply something less than true sonship (Gal. 4:5f.; Rom. 8:15f.).

In fact children are born of God and so have full standing as sons (John 1:12f.; I John 3:9).

THE FATHER'S LOVE

Jesus said that if evil men knew how to give good gifts to children, how much more would the Father give the Holy Spirit, or good gifts to those that love him (Matt. 7:11; Luke 11:13; cf. Isa. 49:15; Ps. 103:13).

From beginning to end, the story of Fatherhood and sonship is one of love. Believers were destined in love to be sons (Eph. 1:5). John says it is a demonstration of love that they should be called children (I John 3:1). This love is portrayed supremely in that he spared not his own Son in order that he may have many sons (Rom. 8:29, 32).

CHARACTER OF THE SONS

Sons of God, become such by believing that Jesus is the Christ (I John 5:2), and are recognised by their right actions, and their love of their brethren (I John 3:10). Children, unconsciously proud of their fathers, mimic their manners. So children of God imitate him. They also follow the love pattern of their older brother. (Eph. 5:1–2).

As obedient children, and with reverent fear, they are holy as their Father is holy and reject passions based on ignorance (I Pet. 1:14–17). They purify themselves (I John 3:1–3), they are peacemakers, lovers of enemies (Matt. 5:9, 45; Luke 6:35), doing all things without grumbling, blameless, innocent, children of God (Phil. 2:14f.).

Clearly, no Christian lives like this all of the time. But the stumbling efforts of the child done out of a delight to do the Father's will are accepted (not make him accepted). So also is the regret that comes for not having a more complete obedience.

For this reason he will not lightly regard the chastening of the Father, knowing this comes from his love and will lead to the 'peaceful fruit of righteousness' (Heb. 12:3–11). He can see that in all things, God is working to bring sons to their destiny of being conformed to the image of the Son (Rom. 8:28f.).

Supremely, sons will eagerly seek and be about the business of their Father, and pray that his kingdom will come and that his will, will be done.

REVELATION OF THE SONS

What sons will be like in the age to come is not yet apparent, except that they will be like the Son (I John 1:1–3). The full revelation of what it means to be a son or child of God must wait for the resurrection (Luke 20:36). Believers, together with the whole creation, suffer the limitations placed on them in this age, but accept them with patience (Rom. 8:18–25). The new age will reveal the glorious liberty of the children of God. Then all the waiting will be rewarded as God makes all things new, and says, 'I will be his God, and he shall be my son'. (Rev. 21:5–7).