

THE ADOPTION OF SONS:  
*Its Nature, Spirit, Privileges, and Effects*

A Practical and Experimental Treatise

Rev. Thomas Houston D. D.



Ettrick Press

2021

© Ettrick Press, 2021

Originally printed as:

*The Adoption of Sons* (1872) Edinburgh, Alex. Gardiner.

Here reprinted from the second edition, as included in:

*Works Doctrinal and Practical of the Rev. Thomas Houston D.D.,  
Knockbracken. In four volumes.* (1876) Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot.

ISBN 978-1-8380775-3-2

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Ettrick Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by licence, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographic rights organisations.

Cover design by Marion Dickie

Published by  
Ettrick Press, 98 The Brow,  
BRIGHTON, BN2 6LN, UK

# Contents

Publisher's Preface .....	7
Foreword by Rev. I. MacLeod.....	9
Biographical Sketch of Thomas Houston by Rev. S. Steele .....	15
Introduction.....	31
Chapter 1 - The family of God.....	35
Chapter 2 - The origin and nature of sonship.....	43
Chapter 3 - The believer's relation to God the Father.....	55
Chapter 4 - The believer's relation to Christ .....	65
Chapter 5 - The believer's relation to the Holy Spirit .....	71
Chapter 6 - Fellowship in the adopted family .....	81
Chapter 7 - The spirit of the adopted.....	91
Chapter 8 - The work of the children of God on earth .....	101
Chapter 9 - The privileges of sonship .....	109
Chapter 10 - The government and discipline of the family .....	121
Chapter 11 - Lack of evidence of our sonship.....	135
Chapter 12 - The future manifestation of the sons of God.....	155
Chapter 13 - The Father's house .....	167
Chapter 14 - Practical uses of the adoption of sons.....	179
Appendices .....	197
Appendix 1 - The Fatherhood of God .....	199
Appendix 2 - Manton on the witness of the Spirit .....	203
Appendix 3 - Luther on the witness of the Spirit .....	207
Appendix 4 - Behold, the Bridegroom cometh!.....	209

Extracts from Houston's preface to his collected *Works* (1876), in which *The Adoption of Sons* was included:

*It may be in some measure declared that there are no books in the language which discuss the subject of which this treats in the same full way of didactic instruction, and for the like practical objects and ends. It may therefore be hoped that it will be found of permanent value in Christian families, and to persons indifferent positions in the church.* (p. v-vi)

*While it could not be expected that, in some cases, the sentiments propounded and advocated in these works would fully accord with those entertained by some of the excellent persons who readily subscribed for them, ... the author feels no necessity to offer an apology for openly stating and vindicating what he honestly believes to be in accordance with Scriptural truth. He would ever unfeignedly rejoice that, while the points on which evangelical Christians differ are not immaterial, those on which they are agreed are numerous and fundamental: and that, in the way of candid and manly discussion, existing divisions will in due time be healed. His earnest and constant aim would be, that, 'speaking the truth in love, he may grow up into him in all things which is the Head, even Christ.' Towards brethren of the household of faith, of whatever name, the fervent aspiration of his heart is, 'Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity.'* (p. vii-viii)

# Introduction

The Fatherhood of God, and the sonship of believers, are subjects of transcendent importance to every human being. Both are presented in the most impressive light in divine revelation, and are intimately connected with all right views of the glorious object of worship, and with our character and condition in time, and our hopes for eternity.

The most forcible appeal of the Jewish lawgiver to Israel, as he reproved their rebellion and claimed their devoted obedience, was made to rest on God's paternal relation towards them. 'Do ye thus requite the Lord, ye foolish people, and unwise? Is he not thy father, that hath bought thee? Hath he not made thee, and established thee?' (Deuteronomy 32:6)

This, too, Jehovah himself declares to be the sure foundation of restoration and spiritual blessing to penitent Israel. 'They shall come with weeping, and with supplications will I lead them: I will cause them to walk by the rivers of waters in a straight way, wherein they shall not stumble: for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.' (Jeremiah 31:9)

To stand in the peculiar relation of sons to God is ever represented throughout the Scriptures as the most wonderful distinction of human beings, who were by nature alien, rebellious, and helpless. They are thus brought out of the mass of perdition, to form a society of ransomed ones that is holy and indestructible; they have an interest in the unchangeable love of the Father, and are made partakers of all the blessings which it confers. When the redeemed are represented as living temples—the 'habitation of God through the Spirit'—the fatherly relation of God to them is declared to be the foundation of all that is excellent in their character and blessed in their hope. 'Ye are the people of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from

among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.' (2 Corinthians 6:16-18)

In the view of a relation so distinctive and glorious, of its origin in the eternal love of God, and of its effects in the future blessedness of the saints, need we wonder at the Apostle's lofty exclamation, and the joyful confidence of hope which he expresses, 'Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God! Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.' (1 John 3:1-2)

The moving cause of believers' sonship is thus declared to be God's love; and this is sovereign, great, effective, and unchangeable, so that it can never be adequately expressed or conceived. This love is 'given' or 'bestowed on us,' not on the footing of any worth or merit, nor of any amiable quality in us, but solely through gratuitous affection and favour. The certain result is that 'we should be called' children of God—not by an empty title, but that we should be truly what the designation imports—the sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty, and sharers of the illustrious honour and glory which are inseparable from such a relation.

Considering the Fatherhood of God in covenant to his people, and their spiritual sonship, there is no subject of meditation and self-trial of more absorbing interest—none that is more fitted to draw forth heartfelt trust; to supply the most constraining and animating motives to all holy living and devoted obedience; to minister strong consolation to afflicted ones and mourners in Zion; and to inspire a more joyful and blessed hope.

Is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ indeed our Father? There is no measure to the love, grace, and pity which he will show us; there is nothing within the compass of his power which he is

not prepared at all times to do on our behalf. Are we the called, adopted children of God? Then we have the fullest, strongest ground to confide in his mercy and hope in his salvation; as we are bound to walk worthy of him who has called us to his kingdom and glory. Then we should give all ‘diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end.’ (Hebrews 6:11) ‘And if children, then heirs, heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.’ (Romans 8:17)

# Chapter 1

## The family of God

---

*Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named.  
(Ephesians 3:15)*

*But I said, How shall I put thee among the children? ...  
And I said, Thou shalt call me, My Father, and shalt  
not turn away from me. (Jeremiah 3:19)*

---

The title ‘sons of God’ applied to believers presupposes a family of which the God of all grace is the Father and head.

The word adoption, like the original term *υιοθεσια*, implies the reception into a family of one who did not belong to it by birth. He is ‘put among the children,’ and, according to the full import of the word, he enjoys by transference the full right and privilege of sonship.

That we may see the excellency of this position, and the nature of the relations more clearly, it behoves us to consider, first of all, the family that in heaven and earth ‘is named after Christ.’

Among human beings the family state is the most characteristic and interesting. It was instituted in paradise by God himself, who ordained marriage for man’s help, and solemnized and blessed the first conjugal relation. Even after sin has entered, disturbing the harmony of God’s works, and marring and polluting all human relations, the family is the home of our affections, the centre of tender associations, that which moulds the character of individuals, and shapes, in a great measure, their future destinies—it is the well-spring of diversified pleasurable enjoyment.

In the division and allotment of ancient Israel, distinctive character and prophetic blessing were associated with the tribe, which was



the family in relation to the patriarchal progenitor or ruler; while in the subordinate divisions, individual families were preserved separate and distinct, and marked to honour and blessing, or to rejection and a curse, according to the covenant with their ancestors, and the character which distinguished them.

How honourable it was to be of the seed of Abraham and of the race of Israel, or to be sprung of the house of David! Even in our own day, heraldic distinctions of the family are eagerly coveted; while to have the privilege of a pious ancestry, or to be a member of a family which, however lowly in the world, is one of the Israel of God—saints serving him in holy dedication here, and to be gathered together at length in the Father's house in heaven—is an honour beyond all earthly dignity and glory. The family of God is incomparably the most illustrious in the universe; and to belong to it is a distinction and honour compared with which the loftiest station in human society, and the most glorious material things in the universe, sink into mere insignificance.

### *A family of angels and saved sinners*

In the creation of the heavens and the earth, God at first formed two families of intelligent moral beings—angels and men—separate one from another, and each immediately dependent on himself as its Creator, preserver, and sovereign head.

When a part of the angelic family had rebelled, and were cast out of heaven, and the whole human family had become apostate in the first man, their federal head, Jehovah made provision that his glory should not be totally eclipsed in his intelligent offspring. In the riches of his sovereign grace, he took the portion of the angels that had kept their first estate, and those whom he had chosen to eternal life of the fallen human family, and formed them into one holy

— 1. The family of God —

family, placed under Christ, the Mediator of the new covenant, and the whole in heaven and earth named after him.<sup>1</sup> (Ephesians 2:15)

Thus was the divine Redeemer glorified in being appointed the living head of the church, and ‘head of all principality and power,’ for her benefit; and the purpose was securely laid that, ‘in the dispensation of the fulness of times, all things in heaven and earth should be gathered into one, even in him.’ (Ephesians 1:10)

In virtue of this gracious, all-wise arrangement, the angels that had stood in their integrity were effectually preserved from all possibility of future apostasy and rebellion, and were brought, as ‘elect angels,’ into most intimate union with the Mediator and Surety of the covenant. They were thus shown ‘the manifold wisdom of God,’ and were enabled to contemplate with more profound wonder the mysteries of human redemption.

By the constitution, too, of this holy happy family, effectual provision was made for the recovery and eternal salvation of fallen sinners of mankind. The redeemed are exalted in dignity above man’s primitive condition in innocency by being brought into near and most tender relationship to the second person of the Godhead—their elder brother—and by being associated with holy angels, the elder children of the family, henceforth to be always ‘ministering spirits to them that are heirs of salvation.’ (Hebrews 1:14)

*The glorious members of this family*

How glorious is this family of God in its head and members, in its character and privileges and future destiny!

---

<sup>1</sup> The *naming* of the family may be either after God the Father or the Lord Jesus Christ. With Calvin, we refer it to the latter, as the Lord Jesus is the nearer antecedent, and as this appears to be the more natural interpretation.

—*The Adoption of Sons*—

God the Father, the first person of the blessed Trinity, is its Father and head, and from him, in his economical relation to the covenant, emanates the whole wondrous design of love and mercy.

Christ Jesus, the eternal Son, is the elder Brother, having all the right of the first-born—entire dominion over the family, the goods of his Father's house in his possession and at his disposal, and the blessing in his hands to confer.

Angels that excel in glory are a constituent part of the family, ever ready to execute Christ's command, and to act as ministers of his will, to carry forward the purposes of his love and the designs of his providence. To the saints especially do they minister with watchful tenderness and unremitting care. They joy in their conversion, mingle in their solemn assemblies, bear them up in their hands, encamp around them in difficulty and danger, and at length convey their disembodied souls to glory, and swell for ever the chorus of the new song of the redeemed, ascribing all glory and worth to the Lamb slain.

The 'spirits of the just made perfect' in heaven are another part of this family, while the saints who are now 'the excellent of the earth,' and those who are yet to be gathered into one in Christ, form the rest of this chosen and blessed society, that, separated from the world, are destined to shine forth in 'the beauty of holiness,' and to enjoy the most exalted fellowship with the blessed Godhead throughout eternal ages.

*The glorious properties of this family*

This family into which adopted children of men are brought is characterized by peculiar and excellent properties.

A separate family

It is a *separate society*. Called out of a world lying in the wicked one, and each individual responding to the Saviour's gracious and powerful invitation, 'Come out from among them, and be ye

— 1. The family of God —

separate, and I will receive you,' they regard a state of holy separation as the law of their existence, to be practically followed in all their relations, in their whole spirit and conduct. The 'king's daughter' forgets her own people and her father's house, when the king 'greatly desires her beauty.' (Psalm 45:10-11)

Though the separation which characterizes the family of God does not require us to live as ascetics, or to do violence to natural or social relations, yet it is always real and distinctive. The sons of God are 'strangers and pilgrims on the earth.' (Hebrews 11:13) Their country and citizenship is in heaven. (Philippians 3:20) Their honour and safety alike are here. 'Lo, the people shall dwell alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations.' (Numbers 23:9) The declaration of the parting benediction of Moses is the perpetual characteristic of the spiritual Israel—the family of God. 'Israel then shall dwell in safety alone: the fountain of Jacob shall be upon a land of corn and wine; also his heavens shall drop down dew.' (Deuteronomy 33:8)

In the expressive terms of a precious fragment of Christian antiquity, 'Christians are not separated from other men by country, nor by language, nor by customs. They dwell not in cities of their own, nor make use of a peculiar dialect, nor affect a singular mode of life. They live in the cities of the Greeks or the barbarians, as each one's lot may lie; and with regard to dress and food, or other matters of everyday life, they follow the customs of the country, yet they show a peculiarity of conduct wonderful and striking to all. They dwell in their own native land as sojourners. They take a part in everything as citizens, and yet endure all things as if strangers. Every foreign country is as a fatherland, and every fatherland as a foreign country. They live in the flesh, but not according to the flesh. They pass their time on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the established laws, and yet raise themselves above the laws by their lives. They love all, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown, and condemned. They are killed, and made alive. They are poor, and make many rich. They are in want of all things,

and abound in all things. They are dishonoured, and amid their dishonour are glorified. In a word, what the soul is to the body, that are Christians in the world.’ (*Epistle to Diognetus*, 5-6)

#### A holy family

It is a *holy family*. This is its grand characteristic. ‘Israel was holiness to the Lord.’ (Jeremiah 2:3) ‘Ye are a holy nation, a peculiar people, a royal priesthood.’ (1 Peter 2:9)

God, its Father, is ‘glorious in holiness.’ Jesus, the elder brother, our great high priest, has inscribed on the girdle of his golden garments, ‘Holiness to the Lord.’ (Exodus 28:36)

The angels, who form a part of the family, stand in their original purity, ‘ten thousands of his holy ones.’

The adopted from men are spiritual associates to the Lord. They are called to be saints. The vow of holy consecration is upon them, and one day they shall appear ‘in the beauty of holiness,’ as ‘the dew from the womb of the morning,’ ‘without spot or wrinkle, or any such thing.’

#### A loving family

Again, it is *loving*. The Father of the family is ‘Love’—infinite, eternal, unchangeable. His sovereign, gratuitous love moved his choice of them that were to be redeemed from among men, and gave origin to all that is done for their redemption and final felicity. Christ’s love to his saints is self-sacrificing, unparalleled, and transcendently wonderful.

Of holy angels and saints, whether on earth or glorified in heaven, love is the ruling principle of their hearts, that which actuates their whole spirit and conduct. They love the Father with supreme affection, and delight themselves in him. The love of Christ constrains them to live to him alone. They have complacency in fellow-saints, as bearing the image of the same Father in heaven, and as partakers of the common salvation. And, in the spirit of

— 1. The family of God —

genuine benevolence, they love their enemies and pray for them, and do good to them that despitefully use them and persecute them.

A family that brings blessing

The family of God is, finally, the *blessing* of the world. To Abraham was given the promise, ‘In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.’ (Genesis 22:18) Blessings of every kind—all that are substantial and enduring—not only come from God, and through Christ, the Mediator; but by the divine family named after Christ, and in connection with them, all blessings—temporal, spiritual, and eternal—are dispensed, and to be enjoyed.

Believers are ‘the lights of the world,’ and ‘the salt of the earth’—the preserving, purifying, and all-quickenng principle in the mass of human corruption, and the light that dispels the darkness of error and sin, and that shall ultimately fill the whole earth with the effulgence of God’s glory.

To the family, thus separate, loving, and holy, the assurance is given, ‘I will make them and the places round about my hill a blessing; and I will cause the shower to come down in his season; there shall be showers of blessing.’ (Ezekiel 34:26)

Every member of this ‘household of faith’ should be always ready to present to others the invitation of Moses to Hobab, his father-in-law, to unite in the happy fellowship. ‘We are journeying unto the place of which the Lord said, I will give it you; come thou with us, and we will do thee good, for the Lord hath spoken good concerning Israel. And it shall be, if thou go with us, yea, it shall be, that what goodness the Lord shall do unto us, the same will we do unto thee.’ (Numbers 10:29, 32)