

Adoption and the Paradox of Faith

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My objective in proposing this topic is to direct our attention to three propositions that bear heavily on Christian belief. Taken together, they address the status to which the Christian believer has been raised and the prospects for his life in this world. In stating the propositions I shall raise two rather fundamental questions. First, what is it in which our salvation is grounded and what is the *modus operandi* of it? And second, to what extent is it possible for us to achieve in this life an understanding of what that salvation means and involves? It might be supposed at the beginning that of course we know what salvation is and means; and of course we know what is to be known about it. But such a claim, I suggest, is at best superficial and evidences a failure to be concerned with the depth of meaning and reflection that the questions before us hold and deserve.

I shall be bringing into focus two issues that deserve our deepest reflection. And in order to exhibit the issues clearly I shall adduce in due course a question of textual exegesis that bears directly on them. But first, let me observe the following by way of orientation. When we address the fact and the process of our salvation we are speaking of the question of *soteriology*; and when we speak of the possibility of the knowledge of what salvation involves we are raising the question of *epistemology*. I am therefore bringing into focus the closely related questions of *soteriology* and *epistemology* because it is necessary to see the manner in which both those questions are resolved, so far as their bearing on the Christian life is concerned. And at that point an important conclusion is to be held by the Christian mind. It is that both those questions are resolved in, and by, Christ. If we do not see that the questions of both salvation and the possibility of knowledge find their resolution in Christ we have decided to be content with a form of belief that is lower than the biblical revelation. Let me state and then summarize my three propositions.

The *first proposition* is in two parts. First, by reason of the regenerating work of the Spirit of God in the soul the believer is joined to Christ in a vital and indissoluble union. He is, at the moment of faith, the beneficiary of God's declarative-forensic statements of justification and adoption. But second, the believer nevertheless *does not know* in this life, and in the nature of the divine-human relation he *cannot know* in this life all that is meant and implied by that union and adoption.

The *second proposition* follows and states that the capacity to know, in the sense of understanding the complete implications of the facts at issue, is restricted by the finitude that determines the human epistemic capacity. That is to say, as we shall see more fully, because man is the analogue of God his Creator both as to his being and his knowledge, while he can know *truly* what God has declared, he cannot know *comprehensively* anything of God's declaration and purpose. His knowledge is necessarily partial. That partialness, moreover, is further restricted or is aggravated by the fact of man's naturally sinful state, from the entailment of which he cannot escape completely in this life. The reality of sin and its clinging residue in the life of the Christian implies that he is necessarily unaware of its magnitude, its gravity, and its

degree of discordance from the purity of life to which the Christian is called.

My third proposition follows as a resolution of the realities implicit in what has already been said. We are now interested in the *soteriological aspects* and the *epistemological aspects* of what God has said and done in setting forth a salvation for sinners. The *third proposition*, then, is that *It is in Christ that both the soteriological and the epistemological problems are solved*. Our objective is to accord all honor to Christ in whom, as the apostle stated to the Colossian church, “are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). In Christ we find the way of salvation. And in him we find all necessary categories of meaning and criteria of explanation.

Let me introduce my subject further by referring briefly to the natural state of man as he exists after, and as a result of, Adam’s fall. I have spoken at greater length in other places of the fact that man was created as the image of God, and that following his fall in Adam he remains the image of God.¹ Leaving aside for the present a fuller statement regarding the faculties of the soul in their primeval status and relations, it can be said, on the basis of the biblical data and as has been well-established in the Reformed theological tradition, that at the fall all of the faculties of the soul were depraved. That was so in the sense that they were deprived of their initial abilities and capacities and man was, as a result, disabled from discharging the obligations of the covenant of creation, or his offices as prophet, priest, and king. But it is important to hold in view for our present purposes that at the fall the faculties were not obliterated. After his fall into the state of sin man was still capable of expressing the emotion of affection. His affective faculty, as a sheer capability of exercise, remains. Similarly, his intellectual faculty was not obliterated and he was still able to think. And his volitional faculty similarly remained, in that he was able to will and to implement action based on his will. Of course it is to be said also that the actions of all of the faculties were henceforth subject to a bias that sin had introduced into the soul. That bias, to use Jonathan Edwards’ word,² meant that the intellectual faculty was now deprived of the ability to know God truly, the emotional faculty was such that man naturally hated God, and the will was bound and unable to act in accordance with the law of God. It is not necessary to spell out the ways in which the apostle has addressed each of those facts in the first chapter of his epistle to the Romans.

But because the intellectual faculty remains as the natural ability to think, God says to the sinner, “Come now, and let us reason together” (Is. 1:18). And while it is true that in man’s natural state “the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not” (2 Cor. 4:4), our Lord himself, at the very beginning of his ministry called on the sinner to think. For Christ “began to preach and to say, Repent” (Matt. 4:17). And “repent” means, in its basic connotation, “think again.” What is the Christian life, then, apart from a being “transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2)? And is it not an aspect of the high status of the Christian person that he has “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16)? While the import of that last statement is that now, as a result of the ministry of the Spirit of Christ, the born-again person begins to see all things as Christ sees them, it is true that the imperfections and partialness of seeing and knowing of which we have already spoken necessarily remain.

¹ See Douglas Vickers, *Christian Confession and the Crackling Thorn: The Imperatives of Faith in an Age of Unbelief* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), chap. 3.

² Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will* (Morgan, PA.: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1996), 321. Edwards refers to the “fixed bias and inclination” in the soul.

Our propositions, then, are as follows: *First*, the Christian believer is joined to Christ in an indissoluble union though he does not yet know, and cannot know, the full meaning of that union. *Second*, in the very nature of the human condition, characterized as that is by both finitude and sin, it is impossible for one to know anything of God's revelation and purpose fully and comprehensively. *Third*, the consequent *soteriological* and *epistemological* problems are solved in Christ. We must now work out why and how that is so. We have readily available to us Scriptural data that bear directly on the implications of those propositions.

A question of exegesis

An unsettled question in the history of exegesis relates to God's statement recorded by the prophet Isaiah, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Is. 55:8). We leave aside what Edward J. Young has noted as the chiasmic arrangement of the text. In the preceding verse the prophet had spoken of the wicked man's "way" and "thoughts"; and now with a reversal of order he speaks of God's "thoughts" and "ways." A further chiasm is contained in the text, where reference is made to "*my* thoughts" and "*your* thoughts," followed by the reversal, "*your* ways" and "*my* ways."³ But our immediate interest is not in literary form. The question we raise, recalling our introductory observations, is whether the statement is to be understood as carrying primarily a soteriological or an epistemological import. What, that is, are we to understand as the primary statement of the text?

Consider first its soteriological import. If the import is primarily soteriological the statement is being made that God's thoughts and ways relevant to man's salvation and the possibilities and scope of it are completely different from what man himself could have imagined or contemplated. The issue, then, is the meaning of the process of salvation and reconciliation with God. If, to take the other alternative, our focus should fall on the text's epistemological import, the statement is to the effect that God knows and thinks in a manner, on levels, and with a comprehensive awareness of all the relations involved, of which man in his finitude is incapable. The issue then is a matter of how and what we know, and of what we are able to know. The knowledge of God, the text is then saying, the knowledge that God has of himself and of all of the relations within reality external to the Godhead that he spoke into existence, is incomprehensible to us.

Our task now, in the light of what has been said, is to address two questions. First, what relation, if any, is to be understood as existing between the two possible levels of primary import we have raised, and what might be the bearing of the one on the other in their contributions to full Christian understanding? Second, and more particularly, what light does that conjunction of imports throw on our present question of the meaning of the Christian believer's adoption into the family of God?

The soteriological emphasis of the text is clear from the surrounding context, which lays out the magnificent invitation to sinners to come and partake of the water of life, to "buy without money and without price" (Is. 55:1). There we have the promise of God that he will "make an everlasting covenant . . . even the sure mercies of David" (Is. 55:1-3). In the conception of the sure mercies of David we have the messianic promise written large. Indeed, we shall see in due course that the sin that necessarily clutters the

³ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), vol. 3, 382.

Christian life, what we shall characterize as both willful sins and sins of ignorance, is to be recognized for its relation to the “everlasting covenant” that God has established with his people in Christ. An emphasis on the soteriological import of the text is consistent with the context that Isaiah had established at the beginning of the uniquely evangelical aspect of his prophecy. That the entire way of salvation is profoundly different from what man himself could have imagined is projected in the statement that “Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain” (Is. 40:4). In other words, in the whole matter of God’s design of salvation and the rescue from sin into which Adam’s fall had plunged the race, man’s possible imaginations are turned completely upside down. The issue points to what the apostle Paul spoke about convincingly when he observed that here in the whole conception and process of redemption we have “the mystery of Christ” (Eph. 3:4), and that “great is the mystery of godliness” (1 Tim. 3:16). The mystery for Paul was threefold: first, that God, the eternal God whose holiness sin had outraged, should have instituted a way of salvation for sinners and that the redemption involved in it should have been extended to the Gentiles as well as the Jews; second, that the way of salvation should have involved nothing less than the coming into the world of the Son of God, the second person of the Godhead, to become Jesus Christ for our redemption; and third, that he, Paul, the “chief of sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15), should have been called to be an apostle of the redeemer (1 Cor. 9:1).

But the epistemological import of the text is equally clear and important. It is in fact implicit in what has already been said. Young observes in that connection that “The purpose is to state that God possesses *thoughts* (i.e. purposes and designs) and *ways*, and that these are not to be identified with those of man.”⁴ The Puritan commentator Matthew Henry makes a statement in context that clearly contains elements of both the emphases we have noted: “God’s counsels [are] high and transcendent, his thoughts and ways infinitely above ours. . . . Your [thoughts and ways] are conversant only about things beneath; they are of the earth earthy; but mine are above, as the heaven is high above the earth.”⁵ God knows and thinks, and man knows and thinks because he was created as the image of God. As God is rational, so his image, man, is rational. As God’s revealed attributes of holiness, justice, and righteousness declare him to be a moral God, so man also is the moral image of God. But as man’s being is derivative and analogical of God’s being, so his thought and his epistemic capacity are analogical of the thought of God. There exists, that is to say, not only a *quantitative*, but also a *qualitative* difference between God’s knowledge and man’s knowledge. Man, we have said, is the analogue of God as to both his being and his knowledge. In our createdness and finitude we necessarily think sequentially, in temporal processes. But God, who created time and called it into being as the mode of our finite existence, knows and thinks outside of time, in the eternal moment of his eternal day.⁶ God knows the fullness of structural

⁴ Young, *Isaiah*, idem. Young here follows the apologetic of Cornelius Van Til as stated most comprehensively in his *The Defense of the Faith* and *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1955 and 1969 respectively).

⁵ Mathew Henry, comm.. ad loc.

⁶ See Augustine, *Confessions*, various editions, Book 11 on the meaning of time. Cornelius Van Til has observed that “Time . . . is God-created as a mode of finite existence,” *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1974), 66. Herman Bavinck has similarly

interrelations between all possible objects of knowledge that, in the nature of our createdness and finitude, are inaccessible to us.

We can bring together now the soteriological and the epistemological, both of which are now seen to bear on the human condition, and in doing so we are able to see that the relevant issues converge in the meaning to us of the Person and work of Christ. Two results follow for the Christian believer's understanding of what the redeeming grace of God means and implies. First, the sinner who is now conscious of his rescue from sin by the salvation that God has set forth bows humbly before his Creator and Redeemer-judge and knows that his salvation is due only and completely to the incomprehensible design and grace of God. Nothing exists in the sinner's existential status, nothing could have come within the ken of his imagination, that could have conjured a way to his reconciliation with God. Such an understanding and conviction sees that all the issues of soteriology are solved in Christ.

Second, the Christian knows that he is now dependent on God's communication to him by his Holy Spirit for his understanding on all levels, on those levels relating to his salvation and those having to do with all aspects of the meaning of his existence and the interpretation of reality. He now knows that God alone has designed for him all relevant and efficient criteria of knowledge and truth on all levels of investigation and understanding. For as we have anticipated, he has now seen that in Christ "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). The epistemological as well as the soteriological problem is solved, and it is solved for the twofold reasons that exist in and because of Christ.

That is so because, first, on the level of *soteriology*, complete salvation issues from the substitutionary life and work of Christ in this world; and secondly, on the level of *epistemology*, Christ has communicated to the Christian believer the necessary criteria of validity and truth on all levels of knowledge and comprehension. The soteriological and the epistemological now find their common root in Christ and his conveyance of truth to those whom he has redeemed. The question of Isaiah's text is resolved. It is by Christ that we are saved, and it is by him that we have true (though not comprehensive) knowledge and understanding. In Christ the valid criteria of truth that Adam lost are rediscovered to us, the efficient principles, criteria, and presuppositions of knowledge are revealed, and our journey into understanding on all levels is secure under the guidance that Christ provides to us. The Person and work of Christ and the invitation to seek blessing in him structure the context of the chapter in the prophecy of Isaiah with which we began.

The *summum bonum* to know God

What has just been said can be stated in different terms. What, we may ask, is the *summum bonum*, the highest good, for the human person whom God has established in his own image? Surely the *summum bonum* is to see God. But that is precisely what is guaranteed to us in the word that has declared God's purposes. That, surely, is the culmination of what is in prospect for the redeemed in what the prophet has held before us as "the sure mercies of David." We shall see God in Christ, in his glorified humanity,

stated that "time – intrinsic time – is a mode of existence of all created and finite beings," *The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, trans. William Hendriksen, 1977), 156.

in the last great day, and we shall know that we see God. What other manifestations of the Person and image of God will be available to us, what Shekinah cloud of glory or what burning bush, is at this time hidden from us. But while that *summum bonum* of seeing God is delayed until the day of his appearing in Christ, is there not, we may ask, a *summum bonum* for the Christian believer in this life? Is there not a highest good, the consciousness of which is itself the foretaste *in this life*, “the earnest of our inheritance” (Eph. 1:13), the precursor, of what is to come? In this life we do not *see* God, but in the realization of our highest good we *know* God.

To say that it is possible in this life to know God is to fly in the face of what has come down to contemporary thought as post-Kantian agnosticism. We leave aside for the present the so-called Copernican revolution of Kant’s epistemology. He accomplished that revolution by elevating once and for all in secular philosophy the assumption of human autonomy in his argument for the priority of certain categories in the human mind in the formation of knowledge. Knowledge was possible, in Kant’s scheme of things, only of what existed in the phenomenal realm, things that could be seen and touched and handled and subject to empirical test. God, however, Kant consigned to what he called the noumenal realm in which knowledge was impossible. God might or might not exist, Kant argued. It was impossible to know. That is his agnosticism. And theology in the post-Kantian sense has claimed with Kant that he abolished knowledge to make room for faith. It is not necessary at this time to trace out the respects in which Kant’s postulate of human autonomy has sidetracked and tarnished modern theology.⁷ What we claim, rather, is that knowledge of God is possible because God has condescended to make himself known. Both Scriptural data and Christian experience bear eloquent testimony to the fact. We say, therefore, that to know God is in this life the Christian’s highest good.

But what, then, is the meaning of the statement that in this life it is possible to “know” God? We are not speaking now of a bare cognition of the existence of God. The devils have that knowledge and they tremble (Jas. 2:19). But as our Lord himself declared, “this is life eternal, to know thee the only true God . . .” (John 17:3). We know God because God has made himself known to us in Christ. And it is inherent in the fact that the Christian is an eschatological person that when Christ again appears we shall see him with the naked eye and “we shall be like him” (1 John 3:2).

Isaiah’s prophecy has reminded us that God’s thoughts are higher than our thoughts, that they are different, substantially, qualitatively, and in their manner of being, than our thoughts. But it is of the essence of the revelation of redemption that God has accommodated himself to our humanity and to our sin, in that he has disclosed his thought to us. The wonder of God’s condescension is that he has spoken to us in the language of men in order that we might know him. We have said that his thoughts, in the totality of their being and scope, are incomprehensible to us. But it is available to us to know him, and to know his thoughts in the degree that is effective to our highest good in this life and our eternal security.

But now we face the relevance of that conclusion, not only to the meaning of the sinner’s salvation by reason of the work of Christ, but its relevance also to the meaning of his adoption into the family of God. Two things follow immediately. First, in the same way as our justification before God (the detailed theology of which we don’t pause to

⁷ For a discussion of Kant’s system and post-Kantian theology see Douglas Vickers, *The Fracture of Faith* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, Mentor Imprint, 2000), 158, 173, 178-80.

work out at this time) involves a declarative, forensic statement of God, so our adoption into his family again involves his declarative, forensic statement. In short, both justification and adoption involve declarative, forensic, once-for-all statements of God. They both have a distinctly legal reference. By God's statement of justification we are declared to have satisfied all the demands of God's law, a divine judicial statement made possible by reason that the righteousness of Christ is placed to our account. Similarly, the statement of adoption is forensic in the respect that it establishes a legally irrefutable relation from which God's law of justice cannot dislodge us.

But second, again in the light of our conclusion regarding the relation between the soteriological and the epistemological, while we recognize the legalities that are thereby satisfied we acknowledge that we cannot plumb the depth of meaning either of our justification or our adoption. That is what is most prominently at issue. *We cannot plumb the depth of meaning of either our justification or our adoption.* We bow in worship before the God who has saved us and has assumed us into that vital, spiritual, and indissoluble union with Christ that characterizes our condition and our status. In short again, we know that we have been redeemed by the design and implementation of God's covenantal grace, that we are eternally secure within the compass his covenant provides, but we do not in this life know and understand all of the meaning and scope of that redemption. At this time we "see through a glass darkly" (1 Cor. 13:12). We hold a conviction of our redemption that nothing can dislodge, "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature" (Rom. 8:38-39). Enlightened by the Spirit of God, we know that "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" (1 John 3:2). *But we do not know, and we cannot know, all that in the mind and counsel of God is involved in our salvation and adoption.*

The paradox of faith

We have referred in our title to the paradox of faith. We need to see now where that paradox exists and the relations it sustains to what has already been said. A paradox is a seeming contradiction. Consider the following observations that describe where we stand as to our knowing and knowledge. We know certain things and we hold a firm conviction of the truth of what we know. We know, for example, that we are indissolubly joined to God in Christ. *But we don't know that as God knows it.* We know certain things that are true. But we don't know all the meaning of the things that are true. We don't know the meaning of all that is involved in them for this life, and certainly not all they project for the life that is to come. It seems that our knowledge is paradoxical in a sense. It seems that we know, and yet we don't know. But rather than say at that point that our knowledge status is paradoxical, it is better said that our knowledge is partial. The knowledge we possess on the levels we are addressing is true, but it is incomplete. It is not, to use apologetic language, comprehensive knowledge. We await the full interpretation of the meaning content of what it is that we know. As the apostle has said in his second letter to the Corinthians, "We [know and] walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). We know, moreover, that certain things that we cannot now see, and statements that God has made to us about them, are true. Further, we know the truth of certain things

of which, in our present condition of finitude in this life (a finitude that we shall not transcend even in the life to come) we are ignorant. We know the truth of things that we cannot know in their full scope and significance. That, we are suggesting may appear to be paradoxical. For how can we know that certain things are true if we cannot know their full import and meaning? It is a seeming contradiction, contradictory of all reason. Is or is not our knowledge status, then, “reasonable”? How can any credence be accorded the knowledge claims we make?

It is not necessary at this time to rehearse at length the salvific significance and relevance to our questions of the fact that now we know by faith, not by sight. The relevance will emerge in what follows. It is not necessary to lay out at length the fact that the faith by which we know is itself the “gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). We are conscious that the darkness and blindness of mind that Satan imposed on us (2 Cor. 4:4) have been taken away because the light that God has created within us “has shined into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). What we are calling into focus in that statement is the *palingenesis*, the creation of new life, the grace of regeneration, with which God’s sovereign grace has endowed us.⁸ Now in our regenerate state the eyes of the mind have been opened to see the truth of what God has revealed in his word as to our condition and the salvation he has provided. Now we see and know, with clarity notwithstanding its incompleteness, what was always there to be seen but was concealed from us by the darkening deception of the devil. We have heard the voice of God as the Scriptures have spoken to us. We now see that the Scripture that God has given is self-attesting, and in it we hear God speaking his will and his ways to us. We have seen, moreover, with a brightness that shatters our complacency, the fundamental hermeneutical principle in terms of which that voice of God comes. It is, as we have already noted, the fact and the terms of God’s covenantal design and promise. It is in faithfulness to his stated covenant that God communicates to us his people “the sure mercies of David” (Is. 55:3).

But a paradox of faith remains. We conclude that our claim to knowledge is, as we have put it, “reasonable,” because that claim is firmly secured on a twofold foundation: first, the foundation of faith that we are conscious God has conveyed to us and whereby we know him; and second, the recognition of the self-attestation of the Scriptural revelation of what God has done for us in his Son. In Christ, again, the soteriological problem is clarified and brought to complete resolution. He alone is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). And in him the epistemological problem also is resolved, because in him lie “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Christ in his word to us has given us all necessary criteria of truth and validity in knowledge. By his Spirit we understand.

But a paradox remains. It is a paradox that informs the realities of the life of God’s people as they work out the progress in righteousness to which we have been

⁸ Not all purportedly Reformed theologians hold to the priority of regeneration as an act of God prior to the expression of saving faith. Richard Gaffin, whose attempt to establish a new paradigm in soteriology departs from the traditional *ordo salutis* and focuses on a redemptive-historical conception of *historia salutis*, does not contemplate regeneration, justification, adoption, and sanctification as taking up distinct acts of God. As to the priority of regeneration, Gaffin poses the question “whether the notion of a distinct enlivening act (causally or temporally) prior to the initial act of faith serves this end or is not rather itself a distortion of Paul’s viewpoint.” Gaffin, *The Centrality of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 142. Republished as *Resurrection and Redemption*, (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1987), same pagination.

called. It rests in the fact that now God has made us to be saints (1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2), but we are nevertheless sinners. Saints and sinners. Our knowledge content and the sheer exigencies of life, the experiences we accumulate and the vicissitudes through which we travel, tell us that we are both. That is the paradox. How can it be said that we are joined to Christ, in the vital and indissoluble union of which we have spoken, and yet it is necessary to confess that we are sinners? Moreover, how can it be said, as our title has contemplated, that we have been adopted into the family of God, while yet we sin? The paradox of faith consists not in the claim of knowledge and entry to life in Christ. It exists in the life of faith to which we have been called and on which we have entered. That is the paradox of faith. It is a paradox of the life of faith as that is lived out in the presence of God.

To see more clearly what is at issue we must look, therefore, at what is involved in our adoption into the family of God. And we look at it in the light of the knowledge status that it carries with it.

Adoption

It would be a mistake of the highest order to separate in our thought two aspects of God's dealings with us in salvation that he has inseparably joined. The related doctrines (and the related fact situations implied by the doctrines) of the Christian believer's adoption into the family of God and his union with Christ must be held together and in mutually reinforcing relation. In the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration in the soul the awakened sinner is established in union with Christ. The Westminster Catechism states that the Spirit applies to the sinner the benefits of Christ's redemption by "working faith in us and thereby *uniting us to Christ* in our effectual calling."⁹ The Savoy Declaration of Faith refers pointedly to "[Those] that are effectually called and regenerated, *being united to Christ . . .*"¹⁰ The important Dutch Reformed theologian, Wilhelmus à Brakel, who was prominent in the Dutch Second Reformation of the seventeenth century, grasped the same effects of the grace of regeneration. He observed in relation to the beneficiaries of that grace that "Their mind, will, and affections have been changed. They have become new creatures . . . when the moment of good pleasure arrives for each of the elect . . . the Holy Spirit quickens and grants him spiritual life, *this being a consequence of the soul's union with God in Christ.*"¹¹ The testimony of our fathers in the Reformed faith could be expanded to the same effect.¹²

We say, then, that by God's covenantal design the Holy Spirit works in the souls of those for whom Christ died to the effect that first, those persons are assumed into union with God himself in Christ; and second, by their adoption they are counted members of the family of God and entitled to all the endowments and benefits that follow from, and are associated with, that status. The reciprocal relations that exist between these two levels of benefit, adoption and union with Christ, have in turn several important

⁹ Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 30, italics added.

¹⁰ Savoy Declaration of Faith, XIII, 1, italics added.

¹¹ Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992), vol. 1, 183, italics added.

¹² See John Owen, "*Pneumatologia, or A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit* in *Works* (London: Banner of Truth, 1965), vol. 3, 464.

implications, both for the proper articulation of the relevant doctrines and for the Christian believer's life and walk of faith.

First, the union thus established is, as has been said, indissoluble. But that indissolubility is to be variously understood. It follows not only from the fact that it has been established by the terms of God's covenantal promise, God's faithfulness to which he has sworn by an oath (Heb. 6:17). It follows, with equally secure import, from the reality that as Christ himself cannot be divided, so life in union with him is, for that reason and on that ground, indivisibly established. The union, in other words, is a vital union whereby the very life of Christ is communicated to the believer by the dwelling within him of the Holy Spirit whom Christ has sent. The apostle has stated the issue clearly in his confession, "I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal. 2:20). By virtue of that indwelling of the Spirit the new-born person is "sealed with [the] Holy Spirit of promise," or the Holy Spirit who had been promised (Eph. 1:13), and by the Holy Spirit that seal is "unto the day of redemption" (Eph. 4:30). à Brakel has rightly observed that "This union is real, essential, true, complete, without any reservation, eternally inseparable, spiritual."¹³

Second, it follows from the Scriptural data that union with Christ involves union with the three Persons of the Godhead. Staggering as the thought and realization may be, it would be a diminution beyond the bounds of responsibility to overlook the fact that the mystical union carries with it nothing less than union with the triune Persons of the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The union is not one of identity. It is not an essential union, in the sense that the Christian believer partakes of the essence of the Godhead. He does, it is true, partake of the communicable attributes of God, and in the process of his sanctification those attributes are communicated to him to the extent that, and in the degree that, he is being prepared for the place that God has ordained he will occupy in the eternal kingdom of glory. But union with Christ does not imply the divinization of the believer. Neither will there be a divinization of the redeemed person when he sees God in Christ in the great eternal day. We hold, that is, to the present significance of, and the eternal prospects implicit in, the Creator-creature distinction.

Third, it follows that it is as an individual joined in union with Christ that the Christian believer is adopted into the family of God. *The inseparability of the union undergirds and guarantees the indissolubility of the adoption.* To designate in an alternative way the relations involved, two things can be said. First, the grace of adoption means that the member of the family now lives under a new Fatherhood, from whose grace all of the blessings of adoption flow. And second, that membership carries with it, as has been seen, a vital union with the Son who has been designated Head of the family. An expansive connotation of the union and adoption is contained in chapters 12 of the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), the Savoy Declaration of Faith (1658), and the Second London (Baptist) Confession (1689).¹⁴

Fourth, the union with Christ together with adoption means that, as the confessions state, the individual members are, as a result, "never cast off, but sealed to the day of redemption, and inherit the promises, as heirs of everlasting life."

But it should be noted that the confessions we have referred to not only state that "the children of God have his name put upon them, receive the Spirit of adoption, have

¹³ à Brakel. Op. cit, vol. 2, 89.

¹⁴ Those three confessions contain identically worded chapters 12.

access to the throne of grace with boldness, are enabled to cry Abba, Father, are pitied, protected, provided for.” The equally relevant and important statement is made, sobering and penetrating in its significance, that such persons are “chastened by him as a Father.” But why the chastening? we might ask. And the answer takes us to the remaining issue that we have already anticipated. The chastening, to put it in shortest terms, necessarily follows from the fact of sin in the life of the Christian believer. It is at that point, to state again the issue that is now before us, that we have the paradox of faith in the Christian life. The paradox resides in the fact, we have said, that the adopted member of the family of God is both a saint and a sinner. We look, then, at some aspects of the meaning of what is involved in that realization.

The adopted life

At this point the twofold issues we raised at the beginning, those of both the *soteriological* and the *epistemological* aspects of God’s revelation and purpose, assume a direct relevance. We recall, then, the point at which we began and consider the light it throws on the matter of the progress, and, as we are now confronting it, the elements of sin within that progress, in the adopted Christian’s life. When we raised the issues of soteriology and epistemology, of the method of salvation on the one hand and the competence and validity of knowledge on the other, we saw something of the relations between them. We found, to restate our principal conclusion, that the questions of both salvation (soteriology) and knowledge (epistemology) are resolved in Christ. Salvation exists alone in his perfect substitutionary life and work; and all criteria of knowledge and truth reside in him. The latter question of what and how we can possibly know comes markedly into focus now as we consider the Christian believer’s walk in faith. Let us put what is involved in the following terms.

We know God because God has fulfilled his promise, “I will give them an heart to know me, that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God” (Jer. 24:7). Recalling our earlier comment on the possibility of knowing God, we know him because, firstly, he has made a clear propositional revelation of who he is and what are his purposes with relation to us and our proper relation to him; secondly, that objective revelation is accompanied by his Spirit’s renewing work within the human soul that endows the very capacity to know; and thirdly, that endowment of soul carries with it a disposition, or *habitus*, that with a new naturalness seeks after God. While God’s propositional revelation is clear, it remains unassimilable to the mind of the man who is not yet the subject of God’s renewing grace. God’s *objective* revelation is communicated to us by reason of the Spirit-established *subjective* knowledge capacity and the new disposition within the soul.

But two aspects of our life follow from that initiative which God by his grace has instituted. On the one hand, and allowing the focus of thought to fall firstly on the blessings in the life lived within the compass of God’s adoption, it is true that “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him” (1 Cor. 2:9). The exegesis of the text might lead us to believe that what is in view in it refers to the prospect that God has prepared for his people when they finally have access to the day of glory. Or it might be thought that the reference is to the darkness of mind of the unregenerate man who is unable to see or

glimpse or understand what God is doing with and for the people he has redeemed. That understanding might be reinforced by the further statement in the same context that “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, for they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). But the principal focus of the apostle’s argument has reference, we may conclude, to the fact that the believer does not know, and has not been able to contemplate or imagine, what blessings God has stored up for him *in this life*. The reference, in other words, is to the walk of faith in this life. As to the question again of what we do or can know, it is simply true that God has hidden in his purposes for us more than we can contemplate or imagine, let alone know. It is true, as the text goes on to say, that “God has revealed [those things] unto us by his Spirit” (1 Cor. 2:10). But to say that the revelation that is thereby received is complete, entire, comprehensive, and that it takes up all that resides in the mind of God as to the glory of it and the eternally significant interrelations within it, would fly in the face of all we have argued regarding the partialness of the knowledge that God by his Spirit imparts to us. It remains true for the Christian in his walk in this life that he simply does not know, and he cannot know, all that God has laid up and ordained for him, either in this life or in that which is to come.

A second aspect of the adopted life warrants reflection. Because we live in ignorance of God’s purpose in what he has planned for us in the days that are yet to come, we live, therefore, in trust and faith in his providential ordering. In that respect, we don’t know, because we cannot know, because what is yet to come is hidden from us. But life in that condition of ignorance and the impossibility of knowing does not detract from our settled confidence in God, into whose family we have been adopted. We know, where we cannot see, that he is making “all things work together for good” (Rom. 8:28). That is the measure of our trust. The apostle Peter addressed that condition when he said, referring to our relation to Christ with whom we are joined in union: “Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory” (1 Peter 1:8).

But our immediate concern probes beyond the level of the blessings that life in the adopted family of God provides. We are concerned with what the confessions we have referred to have noted as the chastisement of God the Father. That, we said, issues from the wandering sinfulness of which we are all too easily capable, even though we are true, and truly adopted, believers. We turn finally to reflect on what is involved in that connection.

Again, and most significantly, the question of knowledge and ignorance comes into focus at this point. We refer first to what is perhaps the most alarming aspect of what is now in view. We take this point of relevance first because of the significance it has for the Christian believer’s probe into the meaning of sin. It has been addressed by the Psalmist when he prayed “Cleanse thou me from my secret faults” (Ps. 19:12). At that point David is concerned and worried about the all too real possibility that, while he lived in the presence of God and before his all-seeing eyes, he was guilty of sin of which he himself had not been aware. That is the issue raised by the Psalmist’s insightful recognition that in our Christian walk our very sensitivity to sin, or, we may say, our lack of sensitivity, may leave us unaware of what sin really is and means. Moses also, in his Psalm, evinces similar insight when he observes that “Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our *secret sins* in the light of thy countenance” (Ps. 90:8). The commentator,

Matthew Poole, rightly refers to “secret faults” as “such sins as were secret . . . from myself; such as I never observed, or did not discern the evil of.” And Poole continues, “Pardon my unknown sins, of which I never repented particularly, as I should have done.”¹⁵ Spurgeon is not wide of the mark when he concludes that “We have but a very few sins which we can observe and detect, compared with those which are hidden from ourselves.”¹⁶ It is no wonder that the old seventeenth-century Puritan, Ralph Venning, saw sin as “the plague of plagues.”¹⁷

But the meaning of the possibility of *secret sins*, connoted in the respect we have stated, has a number of implications for the Christian believer’s understanding of his status and his walk in faith. First, why should there be within the Christian’s life-journey any secret sin? The answer turns again on a lack of knowledge. But the fact and the meaning of that lack needs to be worked out a little more fully. The prophet Hosea has illuminated an aspect of what is involved in conveying God’s complaint that “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6). We shall go on to see that the same prophet reflects on the antidote of the ignorance of which he had complained when he said, “Then we shall know, if we follow on to know the Lord” (Hosea 6:3). So that, at a minimum level, the sins of which we are guilty (and there can be no diminution of the guilt they carry in the eyes of God) occur because we have not cultivated the presence of God as we might have done. We have not cultivated the habit of assiduous attention to the mandates of his word and the imperatives of the morality to which his law alerts us. We have not been careful to cultivate an understanding of the real meaning of the status to which we have been raised by reason of our union with Christ; and we have not attended as we should to the imperatives that status carries with it. Lamentably, though we are God’s people who have been adopted into the membership of his family, the reality is that we know him only slightly, and we know only slightly what should be the penetrating and calming wholeness of his preceptive law. We have not learned well the import of the Psalmist’s confession that “I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved” (Ps. 16:8).

The antidote is that we should seek to practice more effectively the presence of God. Do we not yet know what our Lord himself invited us to, the feast of his presence, when he said “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20)? There we have, not an invitation to the unregenerate sinner to open the door of his heart to Christ. Any such misunderstood claim is negated by the conjunction of events at the conversion of Lydia as we have it reported in the account of Paul’s visit to Macedonia. As to her admission to the state of salvation it is said of her, “whose heart the Lord opened” (Acts 16:14). Christ’s invitation to us to let him into our hearts has to do, rather, with our enjoyment of the blessing of his sanctifying grace that he waits to communicate to us. It is a call to diligence in cultivating the presence of God.

But there is further reason for secret sin. Again it has to do with lack of knowledge, and a proper understanding of it points to the wonder of the grace of God in the Christian believer’s progressive sanctification. The fact needs to be faced that at various stages of one’s walk in the life of faith, perhaps notably at an early stage, one

¹⁵ Matthew Poole, comm. ad. loc.

¹⁶ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (McLean, Virginia: Macdonald Publishing, n.d.), vol. 1, 275.

¹⁷ Ralph Venning, *The Plague of Plagues* (London: Banner of Truth, 1965).

may naturally engage in actions, manner of life, and cultural accommodations that are in themselves sinful in the light of God's preceptive mandates. But at the stage of spiritual maturity that then exists, those indulgences are not understood or recognized as sin. One then sins the sin of ignorance. The sins are secret, in the sense in which we have seen such sin to be operative, in that they are not recognized as sin and the believer is therefore not aware of their import and their guilt. As in the case of the Psalmist, they are therefore unrepented. But as in the Psalmist's case again, the believer's advancing sensitivity will cause him to plead with God for the forgiveness of whatever unwitting sin has been placed to his account. For that also, though the import and significance of it may at the time be lost to the individual's consciousness, has been covered by the imputed righteousness of Christ.

Sin, then, is complex. Sin is, clearly, a transgression of the law of God (1 John 3:4). On another view, sin is whatever in thought, word, or deed outrages the holiness of God. Sin is, at the most fundamental level, the repudiation of covenantal obligations that we sustain to God. It is the assertion of autonomy in the face of God, the supposition that we can live in terms of criteria of belief and action that we excogitate from within ourselves or extract from the cultural milieu in which we live. Sin is, in its final expression, a love of self rather than a love of God.

But more than the secret sin, the sin of ignorance, tarnishes the Christian's life and walk. Equally damning, if not more so, is the sin of which we are guilty, consciously guilty, while at the same time we claim the privileges of adoption into membership of the family of God. Is it never the case that we dally with what, in our better moments, we know clearly to be sin? It is undoubtedly true, dangerously true, that there is pleasure in sin. Has the child of God never been shocked into painful awareness that he has fallen where he should have been "steadfast, immovable" (1 Cor. 15:58)? Have we never been startlingly awakened to the fact that "Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14) and that he is able for a time to "deceive the very elect"? Have we never been so sure of our ability to walk circumspectly in the way of righteousness that our very self-reliance has brought us to the agony of fall and defeat? God grant that it were not so. But if we are realistic enough to agree that sin may well be for a time pleasurable, consider Moses of whom it is said that he chose "rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season." And the reason, in its starkest simplicity, was that he "esteem[ed] the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward" (Heb. 11:25-26). The antidote to the ensnaring appearances of the pleasures of sin has been stated definitively in Moses' reaction.

What all of the foregoing amounts to is that our adoption into the family of God and our consciousness of the high implications of our union with Christ beckon us to the cultivation of an increasing sensitivity to the sinfulness of sin. How we should mourn with the poet of the evangelical awakening, William Cowper, when he says that he "hate[s] the sins that made thee [Christ] mourn, and drove thee from my breast."¹⁸ We recall, as our Puritan fathers gave expression to it in various ways, that it is the most advanced saint who is most conscious of the sinfulness of sin and of the blackness of his

¹⁸ Donald Davie, ed., *The New Oxford Book of Christian Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 198.

own heart.¹⁹ May we, with humility and with contrition of repentance, seek the face of God at “the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). For our Lord still says to us, “Come unto me . . . and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28).

Conclusion

We have spoken, briefly but sufficiently for our present purposes, of the realities of the Christian believer’s union with Christ and his adoption into the family of God. A number of implications of what has been said can be summarized.

First, all of our felicity as believers, and all of our comfort in this life and our hope for that which is to come, are found in Christ. God has made him to be unto us “wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). Fullness of life abides only in him to whom we are joined in an indissoluble union. Christ alone is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), and the Christian clarions the assertion with the apostle that it is his heart’s desire to glory in nothing “save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal. 6:14). As Christ came “that he might deliver us from this present evil world” (Gal. 1:4), he now demands, and by his grace we determine to give him, our totalitarian allegiance. It is in Christ that what we have seen as the soteriological and the epistemological questions are resolved.

Second, we know that in the life-journey of righteousness on which God has established us we shall arrive at last at the inheritance he has prepared for us (Heb. 9:15). For has Christ himself not said that “I go to prepare a place for you [and] I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am there ye may be also” (John 14:2-3)? In our life-journey our dependence is completely upon him. Our histories are in his hands. We cannot yet see all of the way. We cannot know his purpose and our way as he knows. We live, nevertheless, in trust upon him because we live in ignorance of what he has prepared for us. In that life of trust we know that the history he is working out for us is linear, its projection is upward. Our history is not confined to a circular blankness and ignorance. Of course, the upward journey is not without its interruptions that are due to the failures of sin, both sins of ignorance and sins of volition. But though the temporary swings of guilt and grace occur, our gaze, in the better moments to which God repeatedly, again and again, recalls us, is on the Savior whose we are and to whom we will come at last.

Finally, what need is there for anything or anyone else than Christ who has redeemed us when, as the apostle has said, “ye are complete in him” (Col. 2:10)? May we yet learn to serve him more faithfully, to walk with him more closely, and to honor him in all things more completely.

¹⁹ See, for example, Venning, *op. cit.*, and John Owen, *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers and The Nature, Power, Deceit, and Prevalency of the Remainders of Indwelling Sin in Believers*, in *The Works of John Owen* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), vol. 6, 5 et seq., and 157 et seq.