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## *Adoption in Calvin's Soteriology: Basis for Redemption or Benefit of Union?*

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Recent years have witnessed an interest in the meaning and significance of adoption in the theology of John Calvin. Nigel Westhead states that, historically, the doctrine of adoption has been neglected; however, this is no fault of Calvin who “made more of the Fatherhood of God than any other writer of the Reformation.”<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, adoption in Calvin’s theology has been viewed as one of the benefits received through engrafting into Christ. However, some authors have recently made claims that go beyond this; adoption is, for them, the controlling principle of Calvin’s soteriology. Howard Griffith, in an otherwise excellent article, asserts that the “adoption of believers is at the heart of Calvin’s understanding of the atonement.”<sup>2</sup> He goes further in saying that adoption is so comprehensive a theme in Calvin’s theology “that it forms a basis for his entire theology of redemption.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Julie Canlis argues that “adoption stands out as one [a soteriological metaphor] which well captures his vision of the saved life.”<sup>4</sup> Like Griffith, Canlis seems to move beyond viewing adoption as a benefit. She concludes her article by equating “union with Christ” with adoption: “Union with Christ as adoption—living as children with a benevolent Father—this is the essence of the justified life that Calvin desired for his flock.”<sup>5</sup> Such statements by Griffith and Canlis raise the question, “Have they gone too far in their claims about adoption in Calvin’s soteriology?”

The purpose of this paper is to challenge their claims and assert that, within Calvin’s soteriology, adoption is best viewed as one of the significant benefits of union with Christ, union with Christ being the actual controlling principle of Calvin’s soteriology. This will involve looking first at Calvin’s commentaries on the New Testament passages using the word *υιοθεσια*,

<sup>1</sup>Nigel Westhead, “Adoption in the Thought of John Calvin,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 13 (1995): 102.

<sup>2</sup>Howard Griffith, “‘The First Title of the Spirit’: Adoption in Calvin’s Soteriology,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 73 (2001): 135.

<sup>3</sup>Griffith, “‘The First Title of the Spirit,’” 136.

<sup>4</sup>Julie Canlis, “Calvin, Osiander, and Participation in God,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 6 (2004): 182.

<sup>5</sup>Canlis, “Calvin, Osiander, and Participation in God,” 184.

followed by an examination of Calvin's use of adoption in Books 2 and 3 of the *Institutes*, which deal particularly with the atonement and salvation.

### The Claims of Griffith and Canlis

#### Griffith's Assertion

Griffith wrote a very helpful article on adoption in Calvin's theology. He is certainly correct in observing that "the adoption of sons" is spread throughout the *Institutes*.<sup>6</sup> He asserts that adoption in Calvin's theology is "so comprehensive a theme ... that it forms a basis for his entire theology of redemption: in embryo in election, in his development of the history of redemption, and in his treatment of Christian experience."<sup>7</sup>

In support of his claim Griffith proclaims that a "quick count of the index to the Battles translation of the *Institutes* shows that Calvin referred to Rom. 8:14–33, where the apostle deals with the Spirit and privileges of adoption, in no fewer than fifty-one sections of Book III!"<sup>8</sup> This certainly sounds impressive; however, it is misleading. A count of the references to these verses in the McNeill-Battles index reveals forty-seven occurrences in Book 3 (not fifty-one) and fifty-nine occurrences in the entire *Institutes*. In Book 3 ten of the referred-to sections are repeated, so that the verses are referenced in only thirty-seven sections of Book 3. If Books 2 and 4 are included in this count (there are no references in Book 1 according to the McNeill-Battles index), then these verses are referenced in forty-nine sections of the *Institutes*. However, there are two problems with this approach. First, using this index of McNeil-Battles is not the most reliable method of discerning Calvin's teaching, as the index reflects McNeil-Battle's work rather than Calvin's.<sup>9</sup> The second problem is that Griffith's statistic leaves one with the impression that all the references deal with adoption. However, when the references are checked an interesting picture emerges. Of the thirty-seven references in Book 3, only sixteen actually deal with adoption.<sup>10</sup> Similar results follow when one considers the whole work; of the forty-nine sections containing these verses, only nineteen refer to adoption. Less than half of the references to Romans 8:14–33 in the *Institutes* refer to adoption. Rather than support Griffith's claim that adoption is the basis for Calvin's entire soteriology, such an analysis weakens his claim.

Using similar reasoning, one can make an alternative claim that reconciliation is the basis for Calvin's entire soteriology. Calvin refers to 2 Corinthians 5: 17–21, where the apostle deals with reconciliation, in twenty-four sections of Book 3, eighteen of which specifically mention reconciliation

<sup>6</sup>Griffith, "The First Title of the Spirit," 136.

<sup>7</sup>Griffith, "The First Title of the Spirit," 136.

<sup>8</sup>Griffith, "The First Title of the Spirit," 136.

<sup>9</sup>Anthony N.S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), xii–xiii.

<sup>10</sup>Not all the instances use the word "adoption." Included in the concept of adoption are the filial terms "sons", "children", and references to God as "Father".

(seventy-five percent). If all four books of the Institutes are consulted, then twenty-five references specifically mention reconciliation in thirty-four sections (seventy-three and one half percent). Comparing reconciliation to adoption, reconciliation is actually mentioned slightly more often than adoption. This is not to suggest that reconciliation is the controlling image of salvation for Calvin; it is not. Doubtless, similar index statistics could be performed on other soteriological images. The point is that Griffith's claim is weakened by looking at the actual uses of Romans 8:14–33 from the McNeill-Battles index. He gives a misleading impression by leading the reader to assume that the references to these verses refer to adoption, when, in fact, adoption accounts for less than half of their use. Griffith is correct in stating that adoption is spread throughout the Institutes, but so are reconciliation, redemption, and expiation, to say nothing of emphasis placed on justification and sanctification/regeneration.

Griffith also expresses concern that general works on Calvin do not treat the issue of adoption, though he acknowledges that Calvin himself has no chapter on adoption in the Institutes. He specifically mentions that neither Wilhelm Niesel nor François Wendel deal with adoption in their works on Calvin's theology.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Griffith states that works on Calvin's doctrine of the Christian life also lack any attention to adoption.<sup>12</sup> He describes such inattention as a major omission.

In light of what was said above, such criticism seems inappropriate. According to Wendel, "Communion with Christ, the *insitio in Christum*, is the indispensable condition for receiving the grace that Redemption has gained for us."<sup>13</sup> Niesel declares that "we do not receive gifts of grace but the one gift, Jesus Christ."<sup>14</sup> Because the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ, Calvin views "the communion of the Head with the members, the indwelling of Christ in our hearts, the hidden union and sacred marriage between Him and ourselves, as the basis for appropriation of the salvation which He has won for us."<sup>15</sup> As one of the editors of the *Calvini Opera Selecta* Niesel is in a good position to understand the basis of Calvin's soteriology. In a similar vein, Wallace comments that the power of sanctification resides in Christ's human nature, therefore, "it follows that our participation in the sanctification of Christ depends on our union with the human nature of Christ."<sup>16</sup> All

<sup>11</sup>Griffith, "The First Title of the Spirit," 135. See Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (London: Lutterworth, 1956); François Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairiot (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987).

<sup>12</sup>Griffith, "The First Title of the Spirit," 135. Griffith references Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959) and John H. Leith, *John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1989). Wallace, however, does not completely ignore adoption; he refers to it at least twice as a benefit of being grafted into Christ.

<sup>13</sup>Wendel, *Calvin*, 235.

<sup>14</sup>Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 122.

<sup>15</sup>Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, 125.

<sup>16</sup>Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

three authors analyze union with Christ, followed by treatments of sanctification and justification, as Calvin does in the *Institutes*. For these authors, and many others, the controlling principle of Calvin's soteriology is union with Christ.

Oddly enough, Griffith says little about union with Christ, even though, at the end of his article, he has to admit that Calvin's doctrine of salvation is centered on union with Christ; yet he then blurs the distinction between basis and benefit by calling adoption "a fundamental structural category for the doctrine of salvation."<sup>17</sup> Rather than these Calvin scholars being at fault, it seems that Griffith has the weaker case. He rarely mentions union with Christ while elevating adoption beyond a benefit, making it a basis, or "fundamental structural category," for Calvin. He seems to criticize them for not seeing the emphasis the way he does. Again, there is much to be gained by studying Griffith's article; he provides a great treatment of an often overlooked aspect of Calvin's soteriology. Excellent though his treatment of adoption may be, his claim goes beyond what is warranted.

### Canlis's Concern

Though more tempered than Griffith in her conclusion, Julie Canlis also views adoption in Calvin's theology as more than a benefit of union with Christ. In fact, she seems to equate adoption and union with Christ when she writes, "Union with Christ as adoption—living as children with a benevolent Father—this is the essence of the justified life that Calvin desired for his flock."<sup>18</sup> Her concern stems from the tendency among Reformed theologians to depreciate union with Christ "as merely a method of appropriation—as that which brings us the benefits of Christ."<sup>19</sup> Though union-for-benefits is part of Calvin's soteriology, it is not the whole of it. When the Spirit unites us to Christ, His life of sonship becomes ours. This means that salvation is more than a transaction or exchange of our sin for Christ's righteousness.

This is the exchange not of good behavior for bad, but an exchange of sonship (raising ontological issues of the 'new creation' and the like). I would argue that sonship for Calvin is not one of many things exchanged, but rather is the category that incorporates and makes sense of all other things exchanged. It is a new identity for humanity that brings with it all the characteristics of sons. It is not a new title that we are given, but a concrete life in relation.<sup>20</sup>

1959), 17.

<sup>17</sup>Griffith, "The First Title of the Spirit," 152.

<sup>18</sup>Canlis, "Calvin, Osiander, and Participation in God," 184.

<sup>19</sup>Canlis, "Calvin, Osiander, and Participation in God," 177.

<sup>20</sup>Canlis, "Calvin, Osiander, and Participation in God," 180–81.

Canlis is certainly correct in asserting that salvation is more than the procurement of a package of benefits. She sees a danger in Reformed scholarship focusing too much on the benefits to the exclusion of true participation in Christ's sonship. She expresses concern that a transaction-based union with Christ will fail to explore the depths of *unio cum Christo* as Calvin understood it. Canlis sees Calvin's trinitarian teaching on adoption as a corrective to the Reformed emphasis on salvation as union-for-benefits. "Rather, *this is our salvation life*—the union of Father and Son. To highlight this, Calvin refers to salvation as our 'adoption'."<sup>21</sup> She adds that salvation is not a transaction, but "rather our inclusion into a form of God's own communion—our adoption."<sup>22</sup> Because salvation is relational rather than transactional, the essence of salvation is adoption.

One of the strengths of Canlis's article is her focus on Christ Himself as our salvation. However, one may ask if she has gone too far in her claim that adoption is the essence of the Christian life in Calvin's theology. At the beginning of Book 3 of the Institutes Calvin states that salvation involves being engrafted into Christ to "enjoy Christ and all his benefits (*Christo bonisque eius omnibus fruamur*)."<sup>23</sup> If the Reformed theologians have stressed union-for-benefits too much, Canlis seems to swing too far in the opposite direction by placing almost all the emphasis on communion. Calvin spoke of both Christ and His benefits, so salvation includes both vital and legal aspects. Canlis has focused on the relational aspect while treating the transactional aspect as secondary. Some of Christ's benefits are relational, such as adoption and reconciliation, while some are transactional, such as justification and sanctification. Canlis would doubtless agree that union with Christ is the controlling principle of Calvin's soteriology. The problem is her assertion that adoption is the meaning of that union, which seems to be somewhat of a stretch. Canlis has exalted one of the Christ's relational benefits and equated it with union with Christ. As noted in the previous section, the same argument could be made for reconciliation, which is also a relational benefit. Union with Christ in Calvin's theology means more than adoption, or reconciliation, or justification, or any other single benefit. Thus, like Griffith, Canlis seems to claim too much in asserting that adoption is the basic meaning of Calvin's doctrine of salvation.

<sup>21</sup>Canlis, "Calvin, Osiander, and Participation in God," 183.

<sup>22</sup>Canlis, "Calvin, Osiander, and Participation in God," 183.

<sup>23</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.1.1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles. Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20–21 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 3.1.3. John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae religionis* [1559] 3.1.3, in *Ioannis Calvini Opera Selecta* [OS], ed. P. Barth and W. Niesel (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1931), 4:1.

### Adoption in Calvin's Commentaries

#### Romans 8:14–23

In his Romans commentary Calvin ties adoption very closely to the Spirit's work of assurance of salvation. Beginning with verse fourteen (*For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God*) Calvin notes that "Paul teaches us that only those are finally reckoned to be sons of God who are ruled by His Spirit, since by this mark God acknowledges His own."<sup>24</sup> Calvin, then, specifically relates sonship to the Spirit's work of assurance. "The substance of his remarks amounts to this, that all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God; all the sons of God are heirs of eternal life; and therefore all who are led by the Spirit of God ought to feel assured of eternal life."<sup>25</sup>

The Spirit's work of assurance continues as the dominant theme in Calvin's comments on verses fifteen through seventeen. What is interesting is that Calvin devotes the bulk of his attention to the Spirit rather than adoption. Understanding "the Spirit of adoption" (πνεῦμα υιοθεσίας) as a title for the Holy Spirit, Calvin primarily addresses what the Spirit does in adoption rather than comment on the precise meaning of adoption. Regarding Paul's statement that we have not received a spirit of bondage, but the Spirit of adoption, Calvin explains that the Holy Spirit does not harass us with fear, but brings our minds to "a state of tranquility, and to stir us to call on God with confidence and freedom."<sup>26</sup> Because the Spirit seals God's forgiveness in us, our adoption makes us bold in prayer. Under the old covenant the people of Israel also experienced adoption as God's children, but things were so obscured in the Old Testament that the law could do nothing but bind those subject to it and pronounce death on all who transgressed it. However, "under the Gospel there is the spirit of adoption, which gladdens our souls with the testimony of salvation."<sup>27</sup> Calvin continues to focus on the Spirit and His assurance with his comments on verse sixteen (*The Spirit himself beareth witness*).

Paul means that the Spirit of God affords us such a testimony that our spirit is assured of the adoption of God, when He is our Guide and Teacher. Our mind would not of its own accord convey this assurance to us, unless the testimony of the Spirit preceded it. There is here also an explanation of the previous sentence, for while the Spirit testifies to us that we are children of

<sup>24</sup>John Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Ross Mackenzie, Calvin's New Testament Commentaries, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 167.

<sup>25</sup>Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 167.

<sup>26</sup>Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 166–67.

<sup>27</sup>Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 169.

God, He at the same time pours this confidence into our hearts, so that we dare invoke God as our Father.<sup>28</sup>

Again, Calvin focuses most of his attention on the Holy Spirit and His testimony of adoption as assurance of salvation.

In his comments on verse seventeen (*And if children, then heirs*), however, Calvin makes quite a strong statement about adoption: “salvation consists in having God as our Father.”<sup>29</sup> Immediately after this statement Calvin turns his attention to the meaning and purpose of our heavenly inheritance. The inheritance that awaits us is something that we share with Christ. He sums up Paul’s exhortation by explaining that we have this inheritance because we have been adopted as God’s children by His grace; possession of our inheritance “has already been conferred on Christ, with whom we are made partakers.”<sup>30</sup> This would seem to indicate that both adoption and inheritance are ours through our participation in, or union with, Christ.

Romans 8:23 states, “*And not only so, but ourselves also, which have the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for our adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body.*”<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Calvin comments that Paul uses adoption improperly to mean the enjoyment of our inheritance, but Paul is justified in doing so because God’s promised inheritance is connected to God’s certain decree of our promised resurrection.<sup>32</sup> He adds that by His decree “God has chosen us as His sons before the foundation of the world, He bears witness to us concerning it by the Gospel, and He seals the faith of it on our hearts by His Spirit.”<sup>33</sup> Here Calvin also ties adoption to election, though he does not comment on this further. His comments on the two following verses also focus attention on the hope of our future salvation and the patience such hope brings.

To sum up Calvin’s treatment of Romans 8:14–23, Calvin seems to place most of the emphasis on the Spirit’s work of assurance of salvation as well as on the value of our future inheritance for patiently bearing the troubles of the present world. Calvin also ties adoption and inheritance to union with Christ, making adoption a benefit.

### **Romans 9:4**

In explaining the problem of Israel’s unbelief, Paul mentions the privileges they possessed: the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises. As members of the covenant, they were adopted as God’s people. Did their unbelief nullify their adoption? Calvin comments that, although “they were unbelievers and had broken His

<sup>28</sup>Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 170.

<sup>29</sup>Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 171.

<sup>30</sup>Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 171.

<sup>31</sup>The verse is the translation provided in Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 194.

<sup>32</sup>Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 175.

<sup>33</sup>Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 175.



covenant, yet their perfidy had not rendered the faithfulness of God void.”<sup>34</sup> God refers to Israel as His son and His first-born (Exod 4:22, Jer 31:9, 20). Calvin notes that by these expressions “he intends not only to commend his indulgence toward Israel, but rather to display the power of adoption, in which the promise of the heavenly inheritance is contained.”<sup>35</sup> Griffith explains that Calvin’s comments mean that membership in the covenant community is considered adoption, even though Israel stood in unbelief.<sup>36</sup> Calvin believed that God’s covenant with His ancient people (in the covenant with Abraham) was established by God’s gratuitous grace, which He continued to offer through new promises. “It follows that promises are related to the covenant as their only source.”<sup>37</sup> Calvin does not offer an *ordo salutis* here, but it seems safe to infer from his comments that membership in God’s covenant serves as the basis for Israel’s relationship to God, that of an adopted son; thus, Israel’s sonship was not the basis for the covenant, but an important result of covenant membership.

### Galatians 4:5

Paul, in Galatians 4:5, says God sent His Son “*that he might redeem them which were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.*”<sup>38</sup> Calvin refers to adoption as a privilege (*iure*) commenting simply that

Adoption, like redemption, in Rom. 8:23, is put for actual possession (*pro ipse possessione*). For as, at the last day, we receive the fruit of our redemption, so now we receive the fruit of our adoption (*fructum adoptionis*), which the holy fathers did not partake (*compotes non fuerunt*) of before the coming of Christ.<sup>39</sup>

Two observations can be made that affect how adoption is understood in Calvin’s soteriology. First, in commenting on the Old Testament believers, he refers to their adoption as a privilege. *Iure*, related to the word, *ius*, can be translated “right” or “privilege,” which inclines one to see adoption as a benefit, rather than the essence, of salvation. Second, Calvin’s statement that the believers before Christ did not partake (*compotes non fuerunt*) of the fruit of adoption certainly implies that believers in Christ do partake of adoption.

<sup>34</sup>Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 194.

<sup>35</sup>Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 194.

<sup>36</sup>Griffith, “The First Title of the Spirit,” 142.

<sup>37</sup>Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 195.

<sup>38</sup>The verse is the translation provided in John Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T.H.L. Parker, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 74. *ut eos qui sub lege errant, redimeret, ut adoptionem reciperemus* in John Calvin, *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Ephesios*, in *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Wilhelm Baum, Eduard Cunitz, and Edward Reuss, vol. 51, Corpus Reformatorum [CR], vol. 79 (Brunswick, NJ: C. A Schwetschke and Son, 1895; reprint, Johnson Reprint Corp., 1964), 223.

<sup>39</sup>Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, 74. *Comm. Gal. 4.5* (CR 78:227).

Such language of participation seems to infer that adoption is a benefit of union with Christ.

Viewing adoption as a benefit in no way lessens its significance as a vital truth of salvation. Calvin's comments on the preceding and following verse bring out the richness of adoption. He comments on verse four that the Son of God became subject to the law so "that He might obtain freedom for us [*ut libertatum nobis acquireret*]." <sup>40</sup> He goes on to say that when Christ took our chains on Himself, He took them off of us, exempting (*immunitatem*) us from slavery to the law. Freedom is the privilege of sons. As in Romans 8, Calvin focuses attention on adoption as the Spirit's work of assurance. He presents the argument in Galatians 4:6 as follows:

Adoption by God precedes the testimony of adoption given by the Spirit. But the effect is the sign of the cause. And you dare to call God your Father only by the instigation and incitement of the Spirit of Christ. Therefore it is certain that you are the sons of God. <sup>41</sup>

The Spirit, as the earnest and pledge of our adoption (*arrham esse et pignus nostrae adoptionis*) gives testimony inwardly to us and assures us of "God's Fatherly attitude towards us." <sup>42</sup> The Holy Spirit also leads us to cry "Abba, Father." Calvin notes that the word "crying" (*κρᾶζον, clamentem*) is an indication of certainty and unwavering confidence (*securitatis est indicium ac minime vacillantis fiduciae*). <sup>43</sup>

Commenting on "Abba, Father" Calvin asserts that since "the Gentiles are reckoned among the sons of God, it is evident that adoption comes, not by merit of the law, but from the grace of faith [*non ex merito legis, sed ex gratia fidei*]." <sup>44</sup> This is consistent with what he says in the *Institutes*. At the very beginning of Book 3 Calvin declares that to receive all the benefits which the Father has bestowed on Christ we must be grafted into Him; "for, as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him. It is true that we obtain this by faith." <sup>45</sup> If adoption is received through faith, and faith is what unites us to Christ and allows us to receive Christ's benefits, it seems reasonable to conclude that Calvin understood adoption as a benefit of union with Christ.

<sup>40</sup>Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, 74. *Comm. Gal.* 4.4 (CR 78:227).

<sup>41</sup>Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, 74. *Comm. Gal.* 4.6 (CR 78:228–29).

<sup>42</sup>Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, 74. *Comm. Gal.* 4.6 (CR 78:228–29).

<sup>43</sup>Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, 74. *Comm. Gal.* 4.6 (CR 78:228–29).

<sup>44</sup>Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, 76. *Comm. Gal.* 4.6 (CR 78:229).

<sup>45</sup>Calvin, 4. *Institutes* 3.1.1. *quia nihil ad nos (ut dixi) quaecunque possidet, donec cum ipso in unum coalescimus. Etsi autem verum est, hoc fide nos consequi.* (OS 4 [1931]: 1).

### Ephesians 1:4–5

In his comments on these verses Calvin could be understood to say that adoption means more than a benefit of union with Christ. Calvin explains that the certainty of salvation is based on the Gospel which reveals God's love to us in Christ. "But to confirm the matter more fully, he recalls them to the first cause [*primam causam*], to the fountain [*fontem*], the eternal election of God [*aeternum electionem Dei*], by which before we are born, we are adopted as sons [*adoptamur infilios*]."<sup>46</sup> Shortly thereafter Calvin says of verse four (even as he chose us in him),

When he adds, in Christ, it is the second confirmation of freedom of election. For if we are chosen in Christ, it is outside ourselves [*Nam si in Christo sumus electi, ergo extra nos*]. It is not from the sight of our deserving, but because our heavenly Father has engrafted us [*inseruit*], through the blessing of adoption [*adoptionis beneficio*], into the body of Christ.<sup>47</sup>

These are very strong statements regarding the role of adoption in salvation. The first ties adoption very closely to election, sounding as if he equates election and adoption. The second could easily be taken to mean that adoption is the means by which we are engrafted into Christ, which would be the case if he understands adoption here to refer to election. However, Calvin later states that the formal cause of our salvation is the preaching of the Gospel, adding, "for by faith is communicated to us Christ, through whom we come to God, and through whom we enjoy the benefit of adoption [*adoptionis beneficio*]."<sup>48</sup> Calvin seems to be imprecise in his use of the term "adoption"; using it as both a synonym for election and as a benefit of *unio cum Christo*.

Two factors, however, indicate that it may be best to view adoption as a benefit of union rather than the basic essence of salvation. First, his somewhat ambiguous use of the term should give pause before concluding that Calvin understands adoption as so comprehensive a term that it sums up the basic meaning of redemption. Second, Calvin's over-arching concern in his comments on Ephesians 1:3–7 is election. He aims to demonstrate that salvation is a work of God's free grace alone from beginning to end, totally excluding human merit. In his comments on verse five (which contains *υιοθεσία*) Calvin focuses his attention on predestination and the three causes of our salvation, giving most of his attention to the efficient cause: the good pleasure of God's will, which automatically nullifies all merit. Calvin

<sup>46</sup>Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, 124. *Comm. Eph.* 1.3 (CR 79:146).

<sup>47</sup>Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, 124. *Comm. Eph.* 1.4 (CR 79:147).

<sup>48</sup>Calvin, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, 128. *Comm. Eph.* 1.3 (CR 79:150).

spends the overwhelming bulk of his comments on these verses to explain the meaning of election and its value in providing assurance of salvation. Though he does make some strong statements about adoption, he is a little ambiguous in his use of the term. Thus, it may be safer not to understand adoption in these verses as the primary meaning of redemption for Calvin.

### John 1:12 and 2 Corinthians 1:20

Though John does not mention adoption in John 1: 12, he does speak of sonship through faith. Calvin notes that we become children of God when we are born of God. “But if faith regenerates us, so that we are *the sons of God*, and if God breathes [*inspirat*] faith into us from heaven, it plainly appears that not by possibility only, but actually—as we say—is the grace of adoption [*adoptionis gratiam*] offered to us by Christ.”<sup>49</sup> Calvin makes it clear that one is made a son of God through faith alone. In his comments on verses twelve and thirteen Calvin discusses the relationship of faith, regeneration, and the Spirit. C. Graafland summarizes Calvin’s slightly confusing *ordo* by explaining that he “points out that there is, first of all, the hidden, unknown influence of the Spirit through which faith is given to us. Afterwards, faith is effective and receives Christ and His blessings, the gifts of the Spirit.”<sup>50</sup> Calvin is not confusing, though, in stating that “Having been engrafted into Christ [*insiti in Christum*] by faith, we obtain the right of adoption, so as to be *the sons of God*.”<sup>51</sup> Here Calvin’s comments are far from ambiguous—adoption is the result of being engrafted into Christ through faith. He is also consistent with his teaching in the Institutes that faith is the means by which we are united to Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 1 :20 Paul writes that “*For how many soever be the promises of God, in him is the yea: wherefore also through him is the Amen, unto the glory of God through us.*” Calvin specifically mentions the promise of adoption in his comments on this verse. He asserts that all God’s promises depend solely on Christ, so that God is gracious toward us only in Christ.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup>John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. William Pringle (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1848; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 41. John Calvin, *Commentarius in Evangelium Ioannis*, in *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Wilhelm Baum, Eduard Cunitz, and Edward Reuss, vol. 47, *Corpus Refonnatonun*, vol. 75 (Brunswick, NJ: C.A. Schwetschke and Son, 1892; reprint, Johnson Reprint Corp., 1964), 11.

<sup>50</sup>Comelis Graafland, “Hat Calvin Einen Ordo Salutis Gelehrt?” in *Calvinis ecclesiae Genevensis custos* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1984), 237. *Zusammenfassendweist Calvin darauf hin, daß es zuerst die verborgene, unbewußte Einwirkung des Geistes gibt, durch die uns der Glaube geschenkt wird. Danach wird der Glaube wirksam und nimmt Christus und seine Wohltaten, die Gaben des Geistes, an.*

<sup>51</sup>Calvin, *John*, 42. *Comm. John 1.12* (CR 75:11).

<sup>52</sup>John Calvin, *2 Corinthians and Timothy, Titus & Philemon*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. T. A. Smail, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, vol. 10 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 21. John Calvin, *Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Corinthos II*, in *Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. Wilhelm Baum, Eduard Cunitz, and Edward Reuss, vol. 50, *Corpus Refonnatonun*, vol. 78 (Brunswick, NJ: C.A. Schwetschke and Son,

These promises give testimony of God's fatherly goodwill toward us, thus they could only be fulfilled in Christ. But, Calvin adds, "we are incapable [*non sumus idonei*] of possessing God's promises till we have received the remission of our sins and that comes to us through Christ [*per Christum consequimur*]." <sup>53</sup> Calvin adds that "the chief of all God's promises is that by which He adopts us as His sons and Christ is the cause and root of our adoption (*causa autem et radix adoptionis*)." <sup>54</sup> Clearly for Calvin adoption and sonship are extremely important—of all of God's promises he names adoption as the most important of all. Yet, as important as it is, adoption is still a promise rather than the comprehensive meaning of redemption. As a matter of fact, adoption is also dependent on the forgiveness of sins, which, along with the imputation of Christ's righteousness, is an essential aspect of justification. <sup>55</sup> Following his comment that adoption is the chief of God's promises, Calvin adds that "God is Father only to those who are members and brothers [*membra sunt et fratres*] of His only begotten Son. Everything comes to us from this one source [*ex illo fonte*]." <sup>56</sup> Our adoption is a result, or benefit, of union with Christ.

Having examined Calvin's treatment of the New Testament passages in which Paul mentions *υιοθεσία*, it would seem best to understand adoption as a benefit of union with Christ and not as the controlling image of salvation. It remains to be seen how Calvin uses adoption in the *Institutes*.

### Adoption in the *Institutes*

Griffith is correct in stating that adoption is spread throughout the *Institutes*. To understand how Calvin uses adoption in the *Institutes* it may be helpful to look at the larger blocks of chapters in which it appears. For example, in Book 2, dealing with Christ's work of atonement, adoption appears a number of times relation to Christ's office as Mediator. In Book 3 on soteriology, Calvin includes references to adoption in the chapter about the Spirit's secret work of engrafting us into Christ as well as the chapter on the definition and properties of faith. The chapter on prayer contains a few references; the chapters on election also contain a number of references to adoption. The most occurrences appear in the chapters on justification.

#### Book 2: The Mediator and the Atonement

General revelation does not reveal God as Father; if we wish to return to God and know Him as Father, we must embrace the cross with humility. <sup>57</sup> Our sonship (and, therefore, our adoption) is grounded in Christ's death on the cross. Nigel Westhead declares that our sonship is "redemptive sonship"

1893; reprint, Johnson Reprint Corp., 1964), (CR 78:22).

<sup>53</sup>Calvin, *2 Corinthians*, 22. *Comm. Cor. II* 1.20 (CR 78:23).

<sup>54</sup>Calvin, *2 Corinthians*, 22.

<sup>55</sup>See, Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.2.

<sup>56</sup>Calvin, *2 Corinthians*, 22. *Comm. Cor. II* 1.20 (CR 78:23).

<sup>57</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.6.1.

because our adoption is grounded in the atonement.<sup>58</sup> Embracing the cross with humility, i.e. believing in Christ, brings one into union with Christ. Commenting on John 1:12 Calvin explains that “it is quite unfitting that those not engrafted [*non insiti sunt*] into the body of the only-begotten Son are considered to have the place and rank of children.”<sup>59</sup> It seems clear that engrafting, or union with Christ, makes sonship possible.

In relation to the law Calvin explains that the law is to be abrogated in the sense that, by Christ becoming a curse for us, it no longer condemns us. Because Christ has redeemed those under the law “we receive by adoption the right of sons [*Quo ius filiorum, adoptione receperimus*].”<sup>60</sup> He elaborates that adoption means that we are no longer burdened by unending bondage [*ne perpetua servitute premeremur*], having our conscience agonized by the fear of death.<sup>61</sup> This is remarkably consistent with his comments on Galatians 4:4–5 that adoption means freedom as children and exemption from bondage to the law. Calvin makes a similar statement when dealing with the differences between the Old and New Testaments. “Scripture calls the Old Testament one of “bondage” [*servitutis*] because it produces fear in men’s minds; but the New Testament, one of “freedom” [*libertatis*] because it lifts them to trust and assurance [*fiduciam ac securitatem*].”<sup>62</sup> Calvin asserts that this is the meaning of Romans 8:15. Again, Calvin is consistent with his remarks in his commentary on Romans 8:15: adoption provides both freedom and assurance of salvation. Westhead aptly observes that adoption “is the category Calvin used to describe the status one enters into upon release from the law.”<sup>63</sup>

In the chapters on Christ’s office as Mediator (2.12–14), Calvin explains that Christ’s task was to make the children of men into children of God. B.A. Gerrish thinks that “of all the good things God promises, adoption is the most important.”<sup>64</sup> In order to do this Christ had to take human flesh in order to “impart [*transferret*] what was his to us, and to make what was his by nature ours by grace.”<sup>65</sup> Calvin further explains that Christ partook of our nature so that we might become one with Him. As a result of this union with Christ, we have the assurance of our inheritance, which is ours because we have been adopted as Christ’s brothers.

Adoption is also used to contrast Christ’s sonship with ours. Calvin asserts that “to neither angels nor men was God ever Father, except with regard to His only-begotten Son; and men, especially hateful to God because of their iniquity, become sons by free adoption [*gratuita adoptione*]

<sup>58</sup>Westhead, “Adoption in the Thought of John Calvin,” 103–04.

<sup>59</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.6.1. (*OS* 3 [1927]: 321).

<sup>60</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.7.15. (*OS* 3 [1927]: 340).

<sup>61</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.7.15. (*OS* 3 [1927]: 340).

<sup>62</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.11.9. (*OS* 3 [1927]: 431).

<sup>63</sup>Westhead, “Adoption in the Thought of John Calvin,” 104.

<sup>64</sup>B.A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 89.

<sup>65</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.12.2. (*OS* 3 [1927]: 438).

because Christ is the Son of God by nature [*natura*].<sup>66</sup> Commenting on this statement Canlis says that the “Son’s union with the Father is not just the mechanism for our salvation, a hoop that Jesus jumped through so we could be saved. Rather, this is our salvation life—the union of Father and Son.”<sup>67</sup> She is surely right in stating that union with Christ is our salvation life. She adds, however, that Calvin “highlights” this by referring to salvation as adoption. However, Calvin uses adoption to differentiate our sonship-by-adoption-from Christ’s-by nature. Our adoption to sonship is a result of being “founded [*in capite fundata esset*] upon the Head,” making us children of God because we are members of Christ the Son.<sup>68</sup> Calvin says essentially the same thing in 2.14.6: Christ, though a called “son” in human flesh, is the true and natural son, not like us who are children by adoption and grace. What Christ possesses by nature we receive as a gift. How? Through union with Christ. Westhead fittingly proclaims, “Clearly there is a union of God and humanity by virtue of the incarnation, but there is also required for sonship in its deepest signification an ‘engrafting’ into Christ. This engrafting is effected through faith”<sup>69</sup> Thus, apart from Christ there is no adoption, which argues for adoption being a benefit of union with Christ.

### **Book 3: The Spirit, Faith, and Justification**

Book 3 contains the greatest number of references to adoption. Calvin begins Book 3 by asking how we receive the benefits which the Father has bestowed on Christ for our sakes. He answers,

First, we must understand that as long as Christ remains outside of us [*extra nos*], and we are separated from him [*ab eo sumus seperati*], all that he has suffered and done for the salvation of the human race remains useless and of no value for us. Therefore, to share [*communicet*] with us what he has received from the Father, he had to become ours and dwell within us [*in nobis habitare*]. For this reason he is called “our Head” [Eph. 4:15], and “the first-born among many brethren” [Rom. 8:29]. We also, in turn, are said to be “engrafted [*inseri*] into him” [Rom. 11:17], and to “put on Christ” [Gal. 3:27]; for as I have said, all that he possesses is nothing to us until we grow into one body with him [*donec cum ipso in unum coalescimus*].<sup>70</sup>

Clearly, union with Christ represents Calvin’s understanding of how we receive Christ and his benefits. Union with Christ is a dominant issue

<sup>66</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.14.5. (*OS* 3 [1927]: 465).

<sup>67</sup>Canlis, “Calvin, Osiander, and Participation in God,” 182–83.

<sup>68</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.14.5. (*OS* 3 [1927]: 465).

<sup>69</sup>Westhead, “Adoption in the Thought of John Calvin,” 106.

<sup>70</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.3. (*OS* 4 [1931]: 1).

throughout the entire book; this is critical in understanding how adoption is used in Book 3.

Because union with Christ is the secret work of the Spirit, Calvin mentions several titles for the Holy Spirit found in Scripture. “First, he is called the “spirit of adoption” [*Primo vocatur Spiritus adoptionis*] because he is the witness to us of the free benevolence of God with which God the Father has embraced us in his beloved only-begotten Son to become Father to us.”<sup>71</sup> The context of the title “Spirit of adoption” is couched within a great deal of language on union with Christ. Later in the same paragraph Calvin again emphasizes that Christ is of no good to us as long as He remains outside us; it is the Spirit who unites us to Christ. The paragraph before this (3.1.2) speaks of Christ’s endowment with the Spirit which is given to us to make us one with Christ. The focus of attention is more on the Spirit’s work of uniting us to Christ than on adoption; such union is the means by which we receive both Christ and His benefits. It would seem best to understand adoption as one of those benefits.

The Spirit’s secret work of engrafting us into Christ leads Calvin to the issue of faith: “the principle work of the Spirit” and the means by which He unites us to Christ. Graafland appropriately remarks that the “entire first part of Book 3 is determined by the thought that the way of faith consists in this, that we are united with Christ.”<sup>72</sup> First, in 3.2.8 he contrasts “that worthless distinction between formed and unformed faith” as a way of achieving salvation with the fact that faith can only occur through the Spirit’s “illuminating [*illuminando*] our hearts unto faith” which witnesses to our adoption.<sup>73</sup> Anthony Lane remarks that Calvin lays stress on the fact that faith can “more appropriately be seen as a belief in God’s good favour to us, in his adoption of us as sons.”<sup>74</sup> Calvin uses the concept of adoption to contrast the false faith of the reprobate with the elect in whom alone “does that confidence [*fiduciam*] flourish [*vigere*] which Paul extols, that they loudly proclaim Abba, Father.”<sup>75</sup> The reprobate have not received the Spirit of adoption so they have not truly tasted the goodness of God, “they grasp at a shadow.” In these instances, Calvin does seem to use adoption as a term for salvation, but he offers little or no elaboration on its meaning or implications. At other times he uses redemption or reconciliation to refer to salvation as a whole. Thus, it appears that these uses of adoption are far from serving as a comprehensive term for the whole of redemption.

<sup>71</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.1.3. (OS 4 [1931]: 3).

<sup>72</sup>Graafland, “Hat Calvin Einen Ordo Salutis Gelehrt?” 238. *Der ganze erste Teil des Buches III wird von dem Gedanken beherrscht, daß das Wesen des Glaubens darin besteht, daß wir mit Christus vereinigt werden.*

<sup>73</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.8. (OS 4 [1931]: 17).

<sup>74</sup>Anthony N. S. Lane, “John Calvin: The Witness of the Spirit,” in *Faith and Ferment: Papers presented at the 1982 Westminster Conference*, 1–17 (London: The Westminster Conference, 1982), 13.

<sup>75</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.11. (OS 4 [1931]: 21).



The chapter on justification contain the most references to adoption. In 3.11.1 Calvin establishes justification as a pivotal soteriological issue.

Let us sum these up. Christ was given to us by God's generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith [*fide a nobis apprehendi ac possideri*]. By partaking of him [*participatioe*], we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled [*reconciliati*] through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.<sup>76</sup>

Later, Calvin adds that justification "is the main hinge on which religion turns [*praecipuum esse sustinendae religionis cardinum*], so that we devote the greater attention and care to it."<sup>77</sup> Canlis interprets this to mean that "justification was the main hinge ... upon which Calvin's polemic turned ... but does not comprise the essence of his trinitarian theology of salvation."<sup>78</sup> However, these appear to be Canlis's words, not Calvin's. He never says justification is the polemic hinge of religion; he does add that justification by faith is the foundation for salvation and piety, which seems to indicate more of the essence of salvation than Canlis is willing to admit. But this raises the question of whether adoption is subordinate to justification. Griffith says no; "On balance it appears proper to say that for Calvin, adoption is too fundamental a category to be subordinated to justification."<sup>79</sup> Westhead provides more cautious advise by noting that, since Calvin does not have a separate chapter on adoption as a distinct locus for salvation, but does treat justification as such a locus (given the eight chapters devoted to it), one can infer that adoption is a central privilege and essential blessing, though it stands in deference to justification.<sup>80</sup> Despite his own strong statements about justification, Calvin seems to treat justification as one of the two most significant benefits of union with Christ (the other being sanctification or regeneration); it is part of the grace we receive from participation in Christ. If adoption is in deference to justification, then adoption must also be a benefit.

In 3.11.4 Calvin, referring to Ephesians 1:5–6, proclaims that we have been destined for adoption based on God's good pleasure by which He has made us acceptable [*acceptos*] and beloved, which he equates with God's free justification, offering no other comment on adoption.<sup>81</sup> In 3.11.6 Calvin states that when God receives someone by grace, He bestows the Spirit of adoption, who transforms the believer into God's image. Calvin, again, does not elaborate on adoption, but rather on the Spirit's work in remaking

<sup>76</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1. (OS 4 [1931]: 182).

<sup>77</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1. (OS 4 [1931]: 182).

<sup>78</sup>Canlis, "Calvin, Osiander, and Participation in God," 182n49.

<sup>79</sup>Griffith, "The First Title of the Spirit," 140.

<sup>80</sup>Westhead, "Adoption in the Thought of John Calvin," 112.

<sup>81</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.4. (OS 4 [1931]: 184).

the believer into Christ's image. The joy, peace, and assurance that come from justification by faith cause us to "open our mouth freely to cry, 'Abba, Father'."<sup>82</sup> The basis of such boldness and assurance for believers lies in the fact that, "being engrafted in the body of Christ [*insiti in Christi corpus*], they are freely accounted righteous [*iusti gratis reputantur*]."<sup>83</sup> Again, adoption seems to be treated as a benefit of engrafting into Christ.

Considering the issue of merit Calvin asserts that our good works testify that the Spirit of adoption has been given to us, thus strengthening our faith (3.14.18). Furthermore, in opposition to the Roman view of merit,

as soon as you become engrafted into Christ through faith [*per fidem insertus es Christo*], you are made a son of God, an heir of heaven, a partaker [*iustitiae particeps*] in righteousness, a possessor of life; and ... you obtain not the opportunity to gain merit but all the merits of Christ, for they are communicated to you [*siquidem tibi communicantur*].<sup>84</sup>

Such language certainly appears to include adoption as a benefit of union with Christ.

Adoption opens the door to God's Kingdom and give the believer a permanent standing in it. The Kingdom is the sons' inheritance [*filiorum esse haereditatem*], not the servants' wages [*non servorum stiperulium*]<sup>85</sup>—only those adopted as God's children will enjoy this inheritance.<sup>85</sup> Gerrish asserts that "the whole of Christian experience—the life of the new self—is then perceived as nothing but the life of God's adopted sons and daughters, and it is in its very essence a life of confidence and freedom."<sup>86</sup> But, in reference to Romans 8:23, Calvin states that "when a man is received into grace by God to enjoy communion [*communicatione*] with him and be made one with him [*unumque cum eo fiat*], he is transported from death to life—something done by the benefit of adoption [*adoptionis beneficio*] alone."<sup>87</sup> Calvin definitely sees adoption as a very significant aspect of salvation, but he also appears to regard it consistently as a wonderful benefit of union with Christ, rather than the essence of the justified life.

Calvin also mentions adoption in reference to prayer. Faith trains us to call upon God's name, that we might request all good things from Him. In

<sup>82</sup>Curiously, Westhead states that Calvin equates justification and reconciliation and concludes that "if Calvin can so mix the soteriological metaphors of justification with regeneration, reconciliation and sanctification, the impression created is that adoption and justification would hardly be separable in his mind" (Westhead, "Adoption in the Thought of John Calvin," 112). Possibly, but the better impression may be that, as Calvin sees justification and sanctification (it is sanctification and regeneration that he seems to equate) as distinct but inseparable, so he views justification and adoption as distinct but inseparable.

<sup>83</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.13.5. (OS 4 [1931]: 220).

<sup>84</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.15.6. (OS 4 [1931]: 245).

<sup>85</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.18.3. (OS 4 [1931]: 270).

<sup>86</sup>Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 100.

<sup>87</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.18.3. (OS 4 [1931]: 273).

this way the Spirit of adoption seals the Gospel in our hearts and leads us to cry "Abba, Father."<sup>88</sup> In his comments on "Our Father" in the Lord's Prayer, Calvin affirms that, because of our adoption, "God both calls himself our Father and would have us so address him. By the great sweetness of his name he frees us from all distrust, since no greater feeling of love can be found elsewhere than in the Father."<sup>89</sup> Because the Spirit testifies to our adoption, we can pray boldly [*audacter*], without hesitation or fear.<sup>90</sup> Similar to his comments on Romans 8:15, our adoption as children should encourage us in our prayers and give us confidence and assurance in our salvation.

Calvin also connects adoption to election in a number of places. Griffith observes that Calvin often refers to election as God's adoption of the believer.<sup>91</sup> God's favor which has been denied to the reprobate "has been displayed in the adoption of the race of Abraham; yet in the members of Christ, a far more excellent power of grace appears, for, engrafted [*insiti*] to their Head, they are never cut off from salvation."<sup>92</sup> The call to repentance and faith is issued to all through preaching, but the gift of repentance and faith is only given to the elect. It is the elect alone who are made sons through faith.<sup>93</sup> Griffith remarks that for Calvin "Christ is the focus of election; this protects us from speculation."<sup>94</sup> He adds that Calvin collapses election and adoption, making them correlative terms. This may be true; however, Calvin employs the concept of union with Christ to bring election into reality and cause adoption to occur: "For since it is into His body the Father has destined those to be engrafted [*inserere*] ... we have a sufficiently clear and firm testimony that we have been inscribed in the book of life ... if we are in communion with Christ [*cum Christo communicamus*]."<sup>95</sup> Calvin again ties adoption to election when he teaches that, though the believer is already adopted by election, he does not come to possess adoption until he is called. When the believer is called, the Spirit gives the guarantee of the believer's future inheritance and provides assurance of his adoption.<sup>96</sup> Those God has called have been designated His children; further, "by calling he receives them into his family and unites them to him so that they may together be one [*ac seipsum iis coadunate, ut simul unam sint*]."<sup>97</sup> Consistent with his other uses of adoption, Calvin's language of engrafting and uniting into Christ usually accompany adoption and explain how it is achieved.

<sup>88</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.1.

<sup>89</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.36.

<sup>90</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.20.37. (*OS* 4 [1931]: 348).

<sup>91</sup> Griffith, "The First Title of the Spirit," 138. Griffith references 3.22.1, 2, 7, 10 and 3.24.4, 5.

<sup>92</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.21.7. (*OS* 4 [1931]: 377).

<sup>93</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.22.10.

<sup>94</sup> Griffith, "The First Title of the Spirit," 139.

<sup>95</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.5. (*OS* 4 [1931]: 416).

<sup>96</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.1.

<sup>97</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.24.1. (*OS* 4 [1931]: 411).

## Conclusion

There is no denying that Calvin sees adoption as very important for understanding salvation and the Christian life. He often refers to the Spirit as the Spirit of adoption who confirms the Gospel and assures us of our salvation. Adoption means freedom from the bondage of the law, living life as children enjoying the Father's gratuitous mercy. Because we are adopted as children through faith in Christ, we can pray boldly. Also, adoption guarantees us an incorruptible inheritance, providing us with hope and prompting us to persevere as we experience the afflictions and tribulations of this world. Thus, adoption is a critical and significant element of our salvation.

The question is whether adoption serves as the controlling image of salvation or as a benefit of our union with Christ through faith. Based on the expositions in his commentaries and his use of the term in the Institutes, it seems best to understand adoption as a benefit of being engrafted into Christ. Even Gerrish, who speaks very highly of adoption in Calvin's theology, must admit, "One cannot say, of course, that gratuitous adoption is Calvin's central dogma, as though everything else in his system were deduced from it."<sup>98</sup> One may say this about union with Christ. Calvin repeatedly treats adoption as a derivative of union. This should not be understood as reducing the significance of adoption in Calvin's soteriology.<sup>99</sup> Union with Christ does not reduce the significance of the benefits—it makes them possible. It must be remembered that, in Calvin's thought, salvation means receiving both Christ and His benefits, both of which can only be obtained through being engrafted into Christ and being made one with Him. Craig Carpenter, though focusing on the particular issue of justification by faith in Calvin, makes a point applicable to the subject of adoption as well: "The critical element of applied soteriology for him is one's becoming engrafted into the resurrected Christ, for to receive Christ by faith is also to receive all his benefits."<sup>100</sup>

<sup>98</sup>Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 123.

<sup>99</sup>Unfortunately, Canlis seems to see "benefit" as meaning a reduced status. For example, Canlis claims that "Calvin began with union with Christ (*unio cum Christo*), and in doing so displaced righteousness from a primary position to a secondary 'benefit' of a more important communion" (Canlis, "Calvin, Osiander, and Participation in God," 172). This is a curious statement given the fact that Calvin devoted eight chapters to the subject of justification; Calvin hardly displaces righteousness to a secondary status.

<sup>100</sup>Craig B. Carpenter, "A Question of Union with Christ? Calvin and Trent on Justification," *Westminster Journal of Theology* 64 (2002): 384.

