

Writ of Adoption

Many people today believe and teach that we are all sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father. A compassionate person must sense a type of kinship with every other person in the world. Haven't we all descended from Adam through Noah?

Yet there are degrees of kinship. We feel closest to the other members of our immediate family, less so to our nearest relatives, and even less to distant relations. But this does not need to be so. There is a type of kinship that can draw us even closer together than that which we share with members of our immediate family. Even though you and I have not even met, I invite you to consider a way by which you and I can become dearest of kin. This type of kinship, according to John's Gospel, results from our becoming children of God.

Jesus did not believe all people born into this world are children of the Heavenly Father. He taught that to become children of God we must first be "born again":

. . . Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God . . . Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (from John 3:3 – 6)

Thus, Jesus taught of two kinds of life. All people have the first kind of life, the life of the flesh, which is ours by virtue of having been born into a physical body. But only some people have the second kind of life, the life which is born of the Spirit. Since we cannot even see the kingdom of God without this second kind of life, much less live there as children and heirs of God, it is very important that we understand how to get it.

We desperately need this second kind of life, because the Bible says that those who have only the first kind of life are actually dead in their sins (Ephesians 2:1). Being spiritually

dead, we are powerless to change our dire situation – powerless even to exercise faith! But our powerlessness is no obstacle to God:

But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ. . . (Ephesians 2:4 – 5)

It must be remembered, Paul is writing to born again believers here, not to the world. “Quickened” means “made alive.” God gives us a new life, a new nature, which is capable of exercising faith. And this faith is the instrument by which we obtain many spiritual benefits, one of the greatest of which is to be adopted as a true child of God.

Likewise, John the Apostle did not presume that all people are God's children. He taught that this type of kinship is granted only to those who have been born again and received Christ:

But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12, 13)

Here John mentions three ways by which we do *not* become born again. 1) We are not born again by virtue of our natural birth (*born of blood*), not even by being born Jewish, “under the covenant,” or otherwise “well-born”. 2) We are not born again by exercising our will, or as the result of our own self-effort (*will of the flesh*). 3) No act of the will of any other mere human can cause us to be born again (*nor of the will of man*).

No, there is only one way to become a true child of God in the spiritual sense, and that is *to be born again, “of God,” and believe on the name of Jesus*. Few today understand what it means to “believe in the name” of someone, but in John's day his readers knew exactly what he meant. To believe in a name meant to *believe in the power of a person who held a particular office, title or rank*. To believe on the name of Jesus means more than simply believing that Jesus exists. It means that you are entrusting your whole self and everything you could ever hope for, completely and absolutely into His care alone. Only such people as trust Him in that way have been granted the “power” to become children of God. Let's consider how Jesus can make us become true spiritual children of God.

The word translated as “power” in the King James Version is the Greek word *ἐξουσίαν* (*exousia*), which connotes a privilege or right granted by law, the type of privilege that is grant-

ed only to some, but not to all. In Rom. 8:15–23 Paul explained to his readers that they had “received the Spirit of adoption.” Thus, while all created people have physical bodies and life of the flesh, only those born again into the life of the Spirit become true spiritual children of God, by adoption. Adoption is a legal declaration whereby an outsider is taken into a family and invested with the same rights and responsibilities as if he were a member of the family from birth.

What are the legal requirements regarding adoption? What prerequisites, if any, must be fulfilled by each party in an adoption? My own experience of having been adopted as a young man illustrates these required conditions. My biological father, Jack Tracy, died when I was an infant. When I was nine years old, my mother married Don Missel. Shortly after that, I was adopted as his son. In order for the adoption to proceed, my stepfather had to meet basically two conditions. First, he had to demonstrate that he had the financial and other practical means whereby he could provide for me as his child. And second, he had to declare his intent to grant me with the same rights and responsibilities that would have been mine were I to have been his naturally born child.

Were there any requirements that I, as his adopted son, had to fulfill? I remember wondering about this as I walked into the judge's office, dressed in a shirt and tie. Obviously I wanted to make a good impression and was nervous about this, but there really wasn't anything that I had to accomplish in order to qualify to become an adopted son. The only two conditions that I had to meet were to 1) admit my need as a fatherless boy, and 2) indicate my desire to be adopted by Don Missel.

The adoptive father supplies all qualifications & resources, financial, practical, and emotional, to meet the needs of the adopted child, and declares his intent to the court that he will indeed discharge his responsibility as a true father for the child. The child supplies only his need and his desire to be the beneficiary of the status as if he were a natural born child, with all the same rights and responsibilities. It is the same way for those who have been adopted into God's family. God supplies the resources – we supply the need.

What is it that determines whether one particular child is adopted by a parent, and not another? It is the parent who selects the child, and establishes the relationship with the child. As the child trusts in the love overtures of the parent and finds himself or herself secure in the relationship established by the parent, the child can respond to the parent in trust, and a real fellowship can be developed.

Some believe that this life is a test of our obedience, to see whether or not we will keep God's commandments, and our performance in this test determines our eternal destiny. The premise is that all of us are related to God and to each other in the same way at the beginning of our lives here on earth. We take the initiative – we determine our eternal destiny by exercising our free will. Our proximity to the Heavenly Father, or the degree to which we will be exalted (or avoid punishment) in the next life, is determined by how resolutely we choose to obey His commandments. In short, our commandment keeping is the prerequisite that qualifies us for a special relationship with Heavenly Father as his beloved child.

But this view does not fit with the concept of spiritual adoption taught in the Bible. Commandment keeping is not a prerequisite that qualifies us for relationship with God. God exercises His own initiative to establish an adoptive relationship with us, and he does this by decree, by a legal declaration of His love and of His intent for us. We have failed in our responsibility to keep God's commandments. But because Jesus suffered the punishment for our sins in our place, God can freely give us new life and adopt us to Himself. Having already been given new life and adoption as a free gift, we keep his commandments—not as a means of obtaining or hanging onto those blessings already given us, but out of the profound gratitude and love for Him that His grace toward us has created within us (Rom. 2:4; 5:5).

One problem with the idea that this life is a test of our obedience is that, if it were up to us, we would never know how good our obedience would have to be in order for us to receive the blessing supposedly promised in return for our obedience. The Bible indicates that, were our eternal destiny dependent upon the quality of our commandment keeping, the standard would be perfection: “For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.” (James 2:10) Since every person has sinned, all of us have been disqualified. No amount of commandment keeping after that could ever bring us to the state of perfect obedience that is required by the test.

Our state of being guilty of the whole law, if not dealt with, would render it impossible for God to adopt us. Were a child to be guilty of a capital offense against the prospective parent, this would obviously hinder his / her prospects for adoption. Instead of an adoption lawyer, the adult would be hiring a litigation attorney to prosecute his case against the child, to seek retribution and obtain recompense for the offense. And this would be the case between God and us, since every time we

fail to obey a commandment we actually do commit a capital offense against Him.

Thus, we are in a very great need of two things, which we cannot do for ourselves. First, something has to be done about the penalty due to us because of our sin. Second, we need a righteousness that is perfect, as if we had never broken any of God's laws. We can rely upon Jesus Christ to provide the solution to both of these needs. First, Jesus died to pay the penalty for our sins (Heb. 9:26,28; 1 Pet. 3:18). Second, the perfect obedience that Jesus gave during his life on this earth is credited to those who put their trust in Him alone (Rom. 4:4-6; 5:17,19; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:7-9). Counting only and completely on His death and righteousness to save you is what it means to believe on His name. Those who believe on His name can rely upon Jesus because of his office as High Priest, and his position as our supreme sacrifice. Jesus has supplied for them the perfect never-having-sinned righteousness that is demanded by God's perfect law.

The Jews in Paul's day were attempting to gain a right standing before God on the basis of their own commandment keeping. This was actually in violation of God's law:

For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth. (Romans 10:3-4)

Thus, if we seek to overcome our current predicament by commandment keeping, we are not submitting ourselves to the righteousness of God. We must acknowledge and submit to His standard of perfect, never-having-sinned righteousness, and admit to the impossibility of our ever meeting that standard. We can only obtain a proper relationship with God if we trust in Jesus that His death satisfied God's justice on our behalf and paid off our debt of sin, and rely upon Him to supply His perfect never-having-sinned righteousness for us.

Those who rely upon commandment keeping to establish their relationship with God or to move God to apply Christ's atonement to them are relying upon a process. It is a lifelong process at that, since the test is this lifetime, and the deadline for "handing in the final exam" arrives upon our death. But adoption does not occur by means of a process. It is an instantaneous change in status rendered by a judicial declarative act at a point in time. My adoption did not occur over a great length of time, or as the result of a lifelong process of qualification for

which I was responsible. The legal process, such as it was, involved other people (the judge, my stepfather, and perhaps some other judicial clerks). My only contribution to this process was my interview with the judge. When I walked into the judge's office, my last name was Tracy. When I walked out, my last name was Missel. My birth certificate was altered and now reads as if I had been born with Missel as my original last name.

Once I also relied upon commandment keeping to establish a relationship with Heavenly Father. I took pride in being a faithful follower of what I had been taught was the one true faith. But my doing this was establishing my own righteousness, instead of submitting unto the righteousness of God, just as the Jews did during Paul's day.

If you have been relying upon commandment keeping to establish a right relationship with God or to move God to apply Christ's atonement to you, despite all your self sacrifice and self effort, you are not submitting to God's righteousness. You are, in fact, insulting God by not accepting His incredible gift of the righteousness of Christ, and heaping a terrible unpleasant surprise for yourself upon judgment day. Instead, I invite you to consider the prospect of adoption by Heavenly Father for yourself. Abandon trying to qualify for the Father's love and forgiveness by commandment keeping. Rely upon Jesus Christ's perfect keeping of all the commandments—his gift of righteousness for you, which will be yours, just as if you had kept them perfectly. Heavenly Father will adopt you as His own true spiritual child, and will pour into your life a new power, which will enable you to keep the commandments much better than you ever could using your mere self-effort in the flesh. Only this type of spiritually powered commandment keeping is pleasing to Heavenly Father.

My adoption by Don Missel made quite a positive impact upon my life as a boy. The sadness and loneliness of my fatherless childhood was lifted by his loving relationship with me. The destitution that could have been mine as a fatherless boy was answered by his provision for my every financial need. I will be forever grateful for the love and sacrifice which my earthly stepfather has shown me. But I am even more grateful for the provision of righteousness that my Heavenly Father has given me, that I could not provide for myself, which enables me to have fellowship in His presence even today.

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