



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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- 33 **Q.** *Why is he called God's "only Son" when we also are God's children?*
A. Because Christ alone is the eternal, natural Son of God. We, however, are adopted children of God—adopted by grace through Christ.
- 34 **Q.** *Why do you call him "our Lord"?*
A. Because—not with gold or silver, but with his precious blood—he has set us free from sin and the tyranny of the devil, and has bought us, body and soul, to be his very own.

Having explained the words from the Apostles' Creed "I believe in Jesus Christ", the Catechism now turns to an explanation of "his only Son, our Lord." Question 33 raises a question many of us have never considered. How can Jesus be God's *only* Son if we too are called sons (and daughters)? The answer lies in the distinction between natural children and adoption.

Because of Adam's sin, we are by nature children of wrath and sons of disobedience (Eph. 2:2-3). We are God's offspring in the sense that he created us and gives us life (Acts 17:28-29), but by nature we are not God's children in a relational sense and God is not our Father. We are not born children of God as if it were our right as human beings. Rather we must be made children of God by adoption. In the fullness of time, "God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). I'm told that J.I. Packer once summarized the gospel in just three words: adoption through propitiation. Now, it strikes me as close to cheating when your simple summary uses two big Latinate words that beg for further explanation, but I have to hand it to Packer, his definition of the gospel is elegantly profound. The short and sweet of the gospel is this: the wrath of God has been turned away from sinners because of the death of Christ so that we might be reconciled to God and brought into his family.

Adoption not only speaks to God's grace, it also undercuts any notions of our merit. I'm not a Christian because I was the morally cutest baby around, nor am a child of God because my parents were Christians (though God used them in the process). I am a son of God by the grace of new birth through Jesus Christ. No faith in Christ, no family of God. The right to be called a child of God is only granted to those twice-born persons who, by the will of God, believe in the name of Jesus Christ, the only Son from the Father (John 1:12-14).

This explains adoption, but still doesn't get to the heart of the question. How is Jesus' Sonship different than ours? The answer is simple: Jesus has not been adopted. He is the eternal and natural Son of God. The Sonship of Jesus Christ, then, is different from ours in two respects. First, we, at the moment of our justification, became children of God, whereas Jesus Christ has always been God's Son. Jesus was not made the Son of God at his incarnation as if some new title or identity was conferred upon him. The Son of God was the Son of the Father even before creation, God having created the world through his Son (Hebrews 1:2). While it is true that the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead declared to the world that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God, this was only an unmistakable proclamation of Christ's Sonship, not a new designation. For the prophets in the Holy Scriptures were, before the incarnation, al-

ready speaking concerning the Son (Rom. 1:1-4). Christ is the eternal Son of God and we became children of God. That's the first difference.

The second reason is closely related to the first. We, by nature, are not God's children, whereas Christ is by nature the Son of God. Here again we are faced with the glory of the Trinity. The Son is not the Father and the Father is not the Son. They are different. The Father sent the Son, but the Son does not send the Father. The Son took on human flesh, but the Father did not. The Son died for sins, but the Father did not. The Son says to the Father "not my will, but yours be done." The Father does not say this to the Son. For all eternity, the first and second persons of the Trinity have existed in loving relationship where the Father delights to express his Fatherhood over the Son and the Son delights to express his Sonship to the Father.

Any yet...and yet, this is not a father-son relationship exactly analogous to ours. There is, to put it theologically, no temporal filiation (begetting a son) in the Trinity. All of our sons became sons at their birth (or really, at conception), before which they did not exist. But the Son of God never came into being. There never was when he was not. The Father did not give life to him in the sense that he created the Son or brought the Son from non-being to being. Rather, the Father shares his essence with the Son and the life he has in himself (John 5:26). So for us, being called children of God means we have been given new life and graciously welcomed into the family of our heavenly Father. But for Jesus to be called God's only Son means he shares equally in divinity, glory, and honor with the Father. Sometimes liberal theologians have argued that Jesus believed he was the Son of God in the same way that we are God's children, but this was plainly not the case. Even the Jews understood the when Jesus declared his radical unity with the Father as his only Son, he was daring to make himself, not just a spiritual child of God, but equal to God himself (John 5:18).

It's worth bringing up Mormonism at this point, because I don't believe an honest Mormon could agree with Q/A 33. Mormons believe "Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He is Heavenly Father's Only Begotten Son in the flesh" (LDS website). But elsewhere they explain that Jesus "was born, as were all spirit children of the Father. God was his Fa-

ther, as he is of all the rest." Jesus was the firstborn spirit child of God and the recipient of the divine birth-right. Jesus, in Mormon theology, is divine, but it only is a derivative divinity. He is not the natural Son of God, nor is his Sonship eternally and ontologically different than ours. Rather he inherited powers of Godhood and divinity from his Father, including immortality. As one leading Mormon apologist puts it, "He is God the Second, the Redeemer." This is positively not what the Catechism, nor the ecumenical creeds, nor the Scriptures mean when they call Jesus Christ "God's only Son."

Answer 34, in repeating much of Answer 1, explains that Jesus is not only God's Son, but also our Lord, because he set us free and bought us to be his own. In other words, Jesus Christ has rights over us. In the Western world, we love rights. We believe we are born with certain inalienable rights (Declaration of Independence), which is true in the right context. But breathing this air, many Americans think, "No one's the boss of me. I'm the master of my destiny. I'm the captain of my soul. I make the rules. I answer to no one." But as Christians, we know this American spirit by another name—idolatry. Being a Christian means dying to ourselves and surrendering our rights to another. The rejection of Jesus Christ is sometimes an intellectual problem and sometimes an ignorance problem, but it is always a surrender problem. We don't easily submit ourselves to any authority, let alone One who claims dominion over every aspect of our lives. But Jesus has the right to supercede our rights.

Ursinus, the chief author of the Heidelberg Catechism, argues that Jesus Christ can claim Lordship over our lives for four reasons: by right of creation (he made us), by right of redemption (he saved us), by reason of preservation (he keeps us), and with respect to ordination and appointment (God has exalted him and placed all things in subjection under his feet). Christ's rule is not some arbitrary authority by virtue of a military coup or political nepotism. His claim of Lordship is well founded. His Lordship was also costly. Jesus Christ didn't establish his authority by taking prisoners, executing judgment, and shedding the blood of his enemies. He is Lord because he shed his own blood. He purchased our bodies and souls with a commodity far more precious than stocks, bonds, gold, or silver. He redeemed our lives by loving us enough to lose his own.

~ written by: Kevin DeYoung