

WCF 12: OF ADOPTION

The benefit of justification, which we considered in the previous chapter may be regarded as the core and foundation of the Christian life; and so the doctrine of justification is the article on which the Christian church stands or falls. For this reason, the doctrine of justification is often presented and taught in such precise theological language that it can be seen as cold and technical notion. Thankfully, however, justification never stands alone. It stands alongside the doctrine of regeneration or the new birth by which we are given faith with which to receive the blessings of redemption, including justification. Additionally, those who understand the doctrine of justification will know that we are justified not only so that we may have fellowship with God, but that we may be adopted as His sons and daughters. It is for this reason that our Confession begins to deal with the doctrine of adoption immediately after its treatment of justification. While justification is the foundation of the Christian life, adoption is the heart of the Christian life.

12.1 All those that are justified, God vouchsafeth, in and for His only Son Jesus Christ, to make partakers of the grace of adoption:¹ by which they are taken into the number, and enjoy the liberties and privileges of the children of God;² have His name put upon them,³ receive the Spirit of adoption;⁴ have access to the throne of grace with boldness;⁵ are enabled to cry, Abba, Father,⁶ are pitied,⁷ protected,⁸ provided for,⁹ and chastened by Him as by a Father;¹⁰ yet never cast off,¹¹ but sealed to the day of redemption,¹² and inherit the promises,¹³ as heirs of everlasting salvation.¹⁴

¹Eph 1:5; ²Gal 4:4–5; ³Rom 8:17; ⁴Jn 1:12; ⁵Jer 14:9; ⁶2 Cor 6:18; ⁷Rev 3:12; ⁸Rom 8:15; ⁹Eph 3:12; ¹⁰Rom 5:2; ¹¹Gal 4:6; ¹²Ps 103:13; ¹³Prov 14:26; ¹⁴Mt 6:30, 32; ¹⁵1 Pet 5:7; ¹⁶Heb 12:6; ¹⁷Lam 3:31; ¹⁸Eph 4:30; ¹⁹Heb 6:12; ²⁰1 Pet 1:3–4; ²¹Heb 1:14.

- Adoption denotes the taking of a child, who is a stranger, into a family, and treating him as a member of it. In spiritual adoption, “we are received into the number,—and have a right to all the privileges,—of the sons of God” (*WSC* 34). Many theologians, e.g., Berkhof, would include adoption as part of justification. However, the *WCF* treats in separately, I believe, for two reasons. Firstly, while justification speaks about our state before God as a judge, adoption speaks about our relationship with God as our heavenly Father. Secondly, justification is purely declarative, but adoption includes not only a change in status, but a change in nature. In a sense therefore, adoption spans justification and regeneration and sanctification.
- Before our conversion, we were by nature the children of wrath and were strangers and foreigners of the household of God (Eph 2:3, 19). When we are translated into His kingdom, the Lord does not leave us to continue to live as aliens, or even as friends of the household of God. He makes us His children in two distinguishable acts. First, He regenerates us so that we may be conformed to the image of His only begotten Son (cf. Jas 1:18; Rom 8:29); secondly, He adopts us as His children.
- Like justification, adoption is an act of God’s free grace whereby we are granted privileges which we had no right to. It is so amazing that though we were enemies of God, we have not only been reconciled to Him, but made His children that John exclaimed, “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God” (1 Jn 3:1a).
- As the adoptive children of God, we are given the right to all the privileges of the sons of God such as:
 1. Fatherly audience and response to our prayers—“And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: And

if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him” (1 Jn 5:14–15; cf. Eph 3:12).

2. Inward assurance that we are the children of God, and therefore can be sure of His fatherly love and care. Paul says: “For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God” (Rom 8:15–16).
3. Fatherly pity in tribulation—Psalm 103:13, “Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him.”
4. Fatherly protection through temporal and spiritual evil—“The LORD shall preserve thee from all evil” (Ps 121:7a; cf. Prov 14:26).
5. Fatherly provision for the needs of our bodies and souls—“your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things” (Mt 6:32b; cf. Ps 34:10).
6. Fatherly chastisement when we stray—“For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth” (Heb 12:6).
7. A sure title to the inheritance of the kingdom of heaven. “And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:17; cf. 1 Pet 1:3–5).