

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php

ADOPTION IN THE THOUGHT OF JOHN CALVIN

NIGEL WESTHEAD, HULL, NORTH HUMBERSIDE

Introduction

Viewed historically the doctrine of adoption for a variety of reasons has had a chequered career and has been more often in the dark than in the light. The Reformed tradition in general is no exception to this, although in more recent times there have been green shoots of recovery, notably in the works of R. A. Webb, R. Candlish and W. Cunningham in the nineteenth century and J. Boice, J. Murray and J. I. Packer in the twentieth.¹ As S.B.Ferguson has noted,² the absence of the doctrine even from the works of Reformed dogmaticians cannot be attributed to Calvin who, in the view of J. Scott-Lidgett,³ made more of the Fatherhood of God than any other writer of the Reformation, thus striking a note 'which has not been heard since Irenaeus'.⁴ Such sentiments invite research into Calvin's understanding of adoption and the Fatherhood of God and the paper which follows distils some of the major features of that inquiry.

Adoption and the Trinity

For Calvin, adoption is very much a privilege for which all three Persons of the Trinity are responsible, albeit in diverse ways in accordance with their respective functions in the Godhead. It is the first Person of the Trinity who is specifically the believer's Father.⁵ This is reflected in the context of Calvin's remarks about the role of the Holy Spirit in the work of adoption where the third Person is distinguished from the Father and the Son, and the Father is seen as the agent in adoption. In this connection Calvin

1 S.B. Ferguson, 'The Reformed Doctrine of Sonship', in N.M. de S. Cameron and Ferguson (eds.), *Pulpit and People. Essays in Honour of William Still* (Edinburgh, 1986), pp. 81-8.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 82f.

3 J.S.Lidgett, *The Fatherhood of God* (Edinburgh, 1902), pp. 253ff.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 257.

5 *Institutes* 3:1:3. All quotations from the *Institutes* are from the translation by J.T. McNeill and F.L. Battles, 2 vols. (*Library of Christian Classics* 20-21; London, 1961).

recognises two angles from which the Fatherhood of God can be viewed. First he thinks of the 'creative'⁶ Fatherhood of God, that is, the fatherly relation he sustains to all human beings and angels by virtue of their being his creatures: 'At their creation angels and men were so constituted that God was their common father' (*Inst.* 2:14:5). From a second angle, he views the privilege of adoption as most properly one constituted by grace and not nature, a consequence of the 'free benevolence of God' (*Inst.* 3:1:3). These two aspects are contrasted at various points in Calvin's writings as we shall now see. The sonship established by created endowment is elsewhere explicated, at least as far as humanity is concerned, in terms of the *imago Dei*. Calvin states:

I allow, indeed, that... because Adam was made in the image of God, his posterity were always reckoned, in a certain sense, to be children of God.⁷

Even the prelapsarian relationship of humanity to God is only 'in a certain sense' to be construed in terms of sonship, and such restraint on Calvin's behalf with regard to 'creative' sonship alerts us to the possibility of there being a fuller, more certain and fundamental sense in which the notion of sonship is to be conceived. This latter sense is apparent when he comments on adoption as viewed in relation to the fall and to God's work of redemption. Because of the fall we are not now sons, for 'our sin [is] just cause for his disowning us and not regarding or recognising us as his sons'. But the Father-son relationship is re-established by the message of the cross, which we ought to embrace 'if we desire to return to God our Author and Maker from whom we have been estranged, in order that he may again begin to be our Father' (*Inst.* 2:6:1). It is, we might say, in this 'redemptive' sonship that for Calvin adoption properly consists. A 'sure' adoption is only to be received by coming to Christ the Head.⁸ This

6 This phrase, as far as I am aware, is not Calvin's but is a useful denotation for this aspect of his thought. It is taken from John Murray, *Collected Writings*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh, 1977), pp. 223ff.

7 *Comm.* on Exod. 4:22f. (*Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses... in the Form of a Harmony I*, p. 103). All quotations from Calvin's commentaries are from the Calvin Translation Society translations (Edinburgh, 1844-55).

8 *Comm.* on Exod. 4:22f. (*Harmony I*, p. 104).

redemptive sonship is so far superior and qualitatively different as to permit Calvin to aver that creative sonship is not sonship at all, for 'to neither angels nor men was God ever Father', but he becomes so only 'by free adoption' (*Inst.* 2:14:5). 'The adoption of all the godly is gratuitous and does not depend on any regard to works.'⁹

The sharp distinction between 'adoption by nature' and 'adoption by grace' and the enhanced character of the latter is reflected in Calvin's comments on those biblical passages which *prima facie* speak of the universal fatherhood of God and its correlate, the universal brotherhood of man. Whilst commenting for instance on Ephesians 4:6, and recognising a universal dimension to God's Fatherhood by citing Acts 17:28, Calvin affirms that 'Father' is the term 'which applies only to the members of Christ'. Again his comments on Isaiah 63:16 confirm the view that sonship, properly speaking, is the 'peculiar privilege of the Church'. A similar delimitation is made with regard to Malachi's question 'Have we not all one Father?' (2:10), where for Calvin the 'all' is exclusively a reference to the Jews.¹⁰

The Trinitarian nature of the privilege of adoption in Calvin comes to further expression in the central place given by him to Jesus Christ. There is no adoption outside of Christ, for 'to be sure', says Calvin, 'the inheritance of heaven belongs only to the children of God.... Moreover it is quite unfitting that those not engrafted into the body of the only begotten Son are considered to have the place and rank of children' (*Inst.* 2:6:1). Outside of Christ, asks Calvin, 'with what confidence would anyone address God as "Father"?' In effect Calvin anticipates the reply, 'no one', 'unless we had been adopted as children of grace in Christ' (*Inst.* 3:20:36). Furthermore, it is the Son who, by his work of atonement secures the grounds upon which the Father can justly adopt us as his sons. The sinner is under the law with its 'bonds of harsh and dangerous requirements, which remit nothing of the extreme penalty of the law and suffer no transgression to go unpunished' (*Inst.* 2:7:15).

Adoption is the category Calvin used to describe the status one enters into upon release from the law. But this is achieved

⁹ *Comm.* on 1 John 3:1.

¹⁰ *Comm.* on Mal. 2:10 (*Twelve Minor Prophets*, pp.540-41).

by Christ himself becoming a curse for us, being made subject to the law, 'that we should not be borne down by an unending bondage, which would agonise our consciences with the fear of death' (*Ibid*). Our access to the Father in prayer is a way 'opened to us by the blood of Christ, [that] we may rejoice fully and openly that we are the children of God.'¹¹ It is precisely because adoption is the fruit of the cross that we must 'embrace it [*i.e.* the cross] humbly' if our sonship is to be restored (*Inst.* 2:6:1).

What is equally essential to the procurement of our adoption for Calvin is not only that Christ takes our place to release us from the law of God, but that he takes our nature through incarnation, so that 'what he has of his own by nature may become ours by benefit of adoption' (*Inst.* 3:20:36). In fact, asks Calvin, 'Who could have [restored us to God]... had not the self same Son of God become the Son of man, and had he not so taken what was ours as to impart what was his to us, and to make what was his by nature ours by grace?' (*Inst.* 2:12:2). The incarnation makes possible the atonement, which in turn restores us to God our Father. The incarnation, however, is not merely a means to atonement but is itself an event upon which our adoption is founded whereby Christ as much as the Father comes to occupy the role of 'Adopter'. Of Christ's role in adoption Calvin says:

His task was so to restore us to God's grace as to make of the children of men, children of God; of the heirs of Gehenna, heirs of the heavenly kingdom.... Therefore... we trust that we are sons of God, for God's natural Son fashioned for himself a body from our body... that he might be one with us... he took our nature upon himself to impart to us what was his (*Inst.* 2:2:2).

This imparting of what was his to us and the taking of what was ours to himself Calvin styles a 'wonderful exchange' (*Inst.* 4:17:2). But what, more precisely, is it that is 'exchanged' in the act of incarnation? Calvin answers in lofty prose:

[His] becoming son of man with us [makes] us sons of God with him; that by his descent to earth, he has prepared ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that, accepting our

¹¹ *Comm.* on Rom. 8:15f.

weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself... he hath clothed us with righteousness (*Ibid*).

Does all this mean that for Calvin, the incarnation as an historical event *de facto* constitutes all men and women children of God in virtue of the 'exchange' of their humanity for the privileges and status belonging to him as Son? We have already seen that Calvin's own sharp differentiation between what we are by nature, on the one hand, and by grace, on the other, leads him to deny the universal fatherhood of God. The same point can be arrived at, however, by following his thinking on incarnation. For Calvin, the historical event of incarnation does not obviate the need for an existential engrafting into Christ, for, as already noted, 'it is quite unfitting that those not engrafted into the body of the only begotten Son are considered to have the place and rank of children' (*Inst.* 2:6:1). Clearly there is a union of God and humanity by virtue of incarnation, but there is also required for sonship in its deepest signification an 'engrafting' into Christ. This engrafting is effected through faith, since

flesh alone does not make the bond of brotherhood... when we say that Christ was made man that he might make us children of God, this expression does not extend to all men. For faith intervenes, to engraft us spiritually into the body of Christ (*Inst.* 2:13:2).

We can bring some completeness to our understanding of the Trinitarian structure of Calvin's thinking on adoption by a glance at the role he assigns to the Holy Spirit. The major function of the Holy Spirit in relation to adoption is to create within the believer a filial confidence – an assurance or persuasion of being a son or daughter of God. Our assurance of God's paternal care for us 'is made certain by the Spirit of adoption'.¹² In fact, says Calvin, the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of adoption precisely 'because he is the witness to us of the free benevolence of God' (*Inst.* 3:1:3). As has often been pointed out, Calvin held to the belief that assurance of salvation was of the essence of saving faith: 'no one can be called a son of God, who does not know himself to be

¹² *Ibid.*

such'.¹³ In keeping with this latter sentiment, Calvin will not allow, as some modern Calvinists have done,¹⁴ that the Spirit of adoption is the privilege of a few. Rather it is, 'the common privilege of all the saints'.¹⁵ Similarly, when commenting on the parallel Pauline passage in Galatians 4:6, Calvin affirms that

In venturing... to call God your Father, you have the advice and direction of the Spirit of Christ.... Let it be observed that Paul ascribes this universally to all Christians.

What is crucially important in Calvin is the inseparable juxtaposition of Word and Spirit in creating a filial consciousness in the believer. Assurance of our sonship comes from leaning and resting upon the knowledge of the divine favour towards us as revealed in the Word, but also as 'sealed on our hearts by the Holy Spirit' (*Inst.* 3:2:7). The promise of our adoption is given by God in the Word, but its veracity and applicability to ourselves need to be witnessed to by the Spirit in our hearts, and are not witnessed to apart from that Word.¹⁶

Adoption and the Covenant

A second major aspect of Calvin's thought, in addition to the Trinitarian dimension, is what we might call the 'covenantal' or perhaps the 'redemptive-historical'. By this we refer to the movement and development of thought with regard to adoption that Calvin perceives in the unfolding of redemption across the contours of covenantal disclosure. In a word, we have to take cognisance of the fact that Calvin's understanding of adoption is arrived at by employing what

13 *Ibid.* On Calvin's view that assurance is of the essence of saving faith, as distinct from the later Puritan idea of assurance as the reflex act of faith, see A.N.S. Lane, 'Calvin's Doctrine of Assurance', *Vox Evangelica* 11 (1979), pp. 32-54.

14 *E.g.*, D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans. An Exposition of Chapter 8, 5-17. The Sons of God* (Edinburgh, 1974).

15 *Comm.* on Rom. 8:15f.

16 For a detailed exposition of Calvin on the Spirit's role in testifying to believers' adoption, see A.N.S. Lane, 'John Calvin: The Witness of the Spirit', in *Faith and Ferment. Westminster Conference Papers* (London, 1982), pp. 1-17.

has been called the biblico-theological method.¹⁷ What results does this method yield as used by Calvin for the doctrine of adoption? To answer this question it is important to remind ourselves of the broader covenantal framework in which Calvin's understanding of adoption in particular is set. For Calvin, any transition or development in the notion of sonship across time must be set against the relationship between the old and new covenants.

In principle these covenants are essentially one. Any movement from one to the other and the attendant changes are formal rather than substantial and do not affect the inner unity of the covenants. Thus in *Institutes* 2:10:1, 2, Calvin points out three major areas of agreement between old and new covenant: 1. The Jews as much as we had set before them the promise of eternal life or immortality, except in a more temporal mode. 2. The Jews were saved as much by grace and not works as we are. 3. The Jews as much as we had Christ at the centre of their faith and religion. Calvin's arguments for the inherent oneness of these two administrations are summarised in his usual vivid manner:

Let us, therefore, boldly establish a principle unassailable by any stratagem of the Devil: the Old Testament... that the Lord had made with the Israelites had not been limited to earthly things, but contained a promise of spiritual and eternal life... away with this insane and dangerous opinion that the Lord promised the Jews... nothing but a full belly, delights of the flesh, flourishing wealth, outward power, fruitfulness of offspring and whatever the natural man prizes! (*Inst.* 2:10:23).

For these reasons, when Calvin thinks of sonship in the Old Testament, he can speak of it in New Testament terms. The covenant with the Jews for instance, he calls 'the covenant of adoption' (*Inst.* 3:2:22), and the even older covenant with Abraham is one which consisted in 'receiving by free adoption as sons those who were enemies' (*Inst.* 1:10:1).

Of course there are contrasts to bear in mind too: 'I freely admit that there are differences between the two testaments'

¹⁷ For definition, see G. Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh, 1982), pp. 3-18, and for bibliography, E.P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ, 1979), pp. 122f.

(*Inst.* 2:11:1). For Calvin these are principally as follows:¹⁸
 1. A stress on temporal blessings, but blessings which nevertheless symbolised spiritual good. '[God] willed', says Calvin:

that for the time during which he gave his covenant to the people of Israel in a veiled form, the grace of future and eternal happiness be signified and figured under earthly benefits, the gravity of spiritual death under physical punishments (*Inst.* 2:11:3).

2. In the Old Testament truth was conveyed by symbols, types and ceremonies. The truth conveyed is the same but the mode is different. The law and the prophets 'gave a foretaste of that wisdom which was one day to be clearly disclosed, and pointed to it twinkling afar off' (*Inst.* 2:11:5).

3. The Old Testament is literal, the New Testament is spiritual. Citing 2 Corinthians 3, Calvin contrasts the 'letter' of the old with the 'spirit' of the new, and 'life' with 'death' and 'condemnation' with 'righteousness' (*Inst.* 2:11:7-8).

4. The Old Testament refers to one nation, the New to all.

5. The final difference between the two covenants bears more directly on the subject of adoption. Citing Galatians 4:22ff., Calvin pinpoints the advancement that the New Testament brings in the believer's experience in these words:

The Old Testament struck consciences with fear and trembling, but by the benefit of the New they are released into joy. The Old held consciences bound by the yoke of bondage; the New by its spirit of liberality emancipates them into freedom (*Inst.* 2:11:9).

As one might expect, there is further detail to be found on this matter in Calvin's comments on Paul's discourse on the covenants in Galatians 3 and 4. Here again Calvin institutes a threefold contrast between the adoption of Old and New Testament believers. First, the Jews were 'under the custody of the law... [which]... did not restrain them from faith; but, that they might not wander from the fold of faith, it kept possession of themselves'. Again this does not mean that the ancient believers were not 'sons', for when Paul speaks of believers who lived 'before faith came' (Gal. 3:23), he does so, says Calvin, 'not in an absolute, but in a comparative sense'. Again, 'while they had the mirror, we have the

¹⁸ For what follows see *Inst.* 2:11:1-14.

substance', but, 'whatever might be the amount of darkness under the law, the fathers were not ignorant of the road in which they ought to walk.'¹⁹ Secondly, believers under the law were 'children' under a 'schoolmaster', being trained for more mature years:

The law was the grammar of theology, which, after carrying its scholars a short way, handed them over to faith to be completed. Thus, Paul compares the Jews to children, and us to advanced youth.²⁰

Just as a child is not so indefinitely but comes to adulthood, so he is not expected to be under the schoolmaster all his life. Here again, we believers of the new dispensation, 'under the reign of Christ, [need] no longer any childhood... consequently, the law has resigned its office.'²¹ Thirdly,

Paul explains and illustrates the difference that exists between us and the ancient people... by introducing a third comparison, drawn from the relation which a person under age bears to his tutor.²²

For Calvin, Old Testament believers resemble 'slaves'. They are in fact 'sons', since the period of guardianship lasts only until the time appointed by the Father, after which they will be free. 'In this respect', says Calvin, 'the fathers under the Old Testament, being the sons of God, were free; but they were not in possession of freedom... [until] the coming of Christ.'²³ Pursuing this line of thought on Galatians 4:24, Calvin terms the covenant symbolised by Hagar as 'legal' and that by Sarah as 'evangelical', the former 'makes slaves', the latter 'makes freemen'.

Thus from a comparison of the old with the new covenant Calvin provides us with a series of sustained contrasts that are the index to his understanding of how sonship develops across these epochs of redemptive revelation – between 'fear' and 'joy', 'bondage' and 'freedom', 'legal' and 'evangelical', 'childhood' and 'adulthood', 'slavery' and the 'freedom of sons'. But salvation does not terminate upon the 'now', but on the 'not yet'. Salvation reaches out to the future and

19 *Comm.* on Gal. 3:23.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Comm.* on Gal. 3:25.

22 *Comm.* on Gal. 4:1.

23 *Ibid.*

provokes us to consider not only what we have become by grace, but what, by that same grace, we shall become at the consummation of all things. What of this eschatological dimension to adoption in Calvin?

To begin with he is aware of the 'now' and the 'not yet' as his comments on 1 John 1:2 make clear:

Our present condition is very short of the glory of God's children; for as to our body we are dust and a shadow, and death is always before our eyes; we are also subject to a thousand miseries, and the soul is exposed to innumerable evils; so that we find always a hell within us.

But, Calvin continues: 'the fruit of our adoption is as yet hid, for in heaven is our felicity, and we are now far away travelling on the earth'. The lucidity of his thought on this point is particularly apparent in his comments on Romans 8:25ff., a context in which Paul himself is speaking of sonship and its privileges. In his comments on Romans 8:17 for instance, it is the thought of sonship as being the qualification for receipt of the heavenly inheritance that is uppermost, and so Calvin affirms, 'It is for children that inheritance is appointed: since God has adopted us as his children, he has at the same time ordained an inheritance for us.' From his comments on Romans 8:23 we can see how he regards the future inheritance as the climax of adoption or that in which adoption properly consists: 'adoption [is] employed here to designate the fruition of the inheritance to which we are adopted', an inheritance, he continues, which amounts to being received by God our Father 'into his celestial inheritance'. This final adoption, furthermore, has as one of its main components the redemption of the body without which 'the sacrifice of the death of Christ would be in vain and fruitless'. Receipt of the heavenly inheritance and the redemption of the body to that end are juxtaposed to a third element that 'all those whom he adopts... be conformed to his [*i.e.* Christ's] example'.²⁴ This note is sounded again in his comments on John's words 'we shall be like him' (1 John 3:2), on which Calvin comments:

He does not understand that we shall be equal to him... but we shall be like him, because he will make our vile body conformable to his glorious body... the final end of our

24 *Comm.* on Rom. 8:29.

adoption is, that what has in order preceded in Christ, shall at length be completed in us.

In a word, the climax of this grace of adoption is renewal in God's image. This image, as we have seen, is the ground of our being children of God by creation. This was only sonship 'in a certain sense', but now the final phase of adoption brings us into sonship in its fullest and richest sense, being conformed not to Adam but to the last Adam, Jesus Christ.

Adoption and Justification

We must now look briefly at a third aspect of Calvin's thinking in the area of adoption, namely, the relationship between adoption and justification. This issue arises since in the history of dogmatics, adoption has not always been viewed as distinct from justification, but rather as a subordinate aspect of justification.²⁵

Given that Calvin himself does not treat adoption as a distinct locus of soteriology but does so treat justification, may one infer that, whilst adoption is a central privilege and core blessing, it is so nevertheless in deference to justification? Certainly there is some evidence to suggest this. In discoursing on justification, Calvin says:

Paul surely refers to justification by the word 'acceptance' when in Ephesians 1:5-6 he says: 'We are destined for adoption through Christ.... That means the very thing that he commonly says elsewhere, that "God justifies us freely"' (*Inst.* 3:11:4).

Later in the same passage Calvin equates justification and reconciliation, strengthening further the thought that justification and adoption may not be distinct. Again in the context of justification he asserts that

Christ cannot be torn into parts, so these two which we perceive in him together and conjointly are inseparable – namely, righteousness and sanctification. Whomever, therefore, God receives into grace, on them he at the same time bestows the Spirit of adoption (*Inst.* 3:11:6)).

Thus in sum, 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.

²⁵ See Ferguson, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-4.

Adoption and the Christian Life

Before drawing this paper to a close, we cannot omit to mention the strong practical and experimental overtones that Calvin associates with the privilege of adoption. What adoption means in practical terms in the believer's life can be divided under two heads – responsibilities and privileges.

Upon those adopted into God's family a three-sided responsibility devolves, first towards the Father, secondly towards the family and thirdly towards the world. As children of the heavenly King we are to be conscious of our high calling and behave in a manner commensurate with that status.

It is no common honour that we are reckoned among the sons of God: it belongs to us in our turn to take care, that we do not show ourselves to be degenerate children to him. For what injury we do to God, if while we call him Father we defile ourselves with abominations of idols! Hence the thought of the high distinction to which he has elevated us, ought to whet our desire for holiness and purity.²⁶

Indeed, 'we have been adopted for this reason: to reverence him as our Father' (*Inst.* 3:17:6). A further reason is in order that our lives might

express Christ, the bond of our adoption.... Since God revealed himself Father to us, we must prove our ungratefulness to him if we did not in turn show ourselves his sons (*Inst.* 3:6:3).

There are, in the second place, responsibilities to discharge towards other members of the family. As far as occasion requires, says Calvin, there ought to be nothing that we are not prepared to share with one another, and the reason is that 'one Father is common to us all... and every good thing that can fall to our lot comes from him' (*Inst.* 3:20:36f.). Since we are sons and God is our Father, 'it becomes us ... to show to his people, to his family the same zeal and affection that we have toward this Heavenly Father'. Thirdly, the charitable and forgiving spirit that should characterise believers in their relationships to unbelievers Calvin sees as a mark of adoption.

The Lord excludes from the number of his children those persons who being eager for revenge and slow to forgive,

²⁶ *Comm.* on 2 Cor. 6:18.

practise persistent enmity and foment against others the very indignation that they pray to be averted from themselves (*Inst.* 3:20:45).

Such weighty burdens are made light, however, when set against the multifarious privileges of adoption which are scattered throughout Calvin's writings. To begin with, the title Father 'supplies us with sufficiently copious materials for confidence'²⁷ in prayer, and the fact that all the hairs of our head are numbered 'instructs us to depend on the fatherly care of God which is exercised over these frail bodies'.²⁸ In addition, adoption is that grace which enables believers to entertain a hope beyond this world, for

the kingdom of Heaven is not servants' wages but sons' inheritance... which only they who have been adopted as sons by the Lord shall enjoy, and that for no other reason than this adoption (*Inst.* 3:18:2).

Further, by disclosing himself to us as 'Father', God 'frees us from all distrust' and as such testifies to us of 'his own boundless love toward us', with the result that he will never fail us and will ever be merciful to us. To look elsewhere for help is to reproach God 'for poverty, or want of means, or cruelty or excessive rigour' (*Inst.* 3:20:36). Even our sins cannot dilute the streams of fatherly love that flow to us, and so we are 'not [to] pretend that we are justly rendered timid by the consciousness of sins'.

If among men a son can have no better advocate to plead his cause before his father ... than if he himself, suppliant and humble, acknowledging his guilt, implores his father's mercy – for then his father's heart cannot pretend to be moved by such entreaties – what will he do who is the Father of mercies and God of all comfort? (*Inst.* 3:20:37).

Moreover, the Fatherhood of God and our relationship to him give us a perspective from which to view all the hardships and rigours of this present life. A life marked by such features is not to be thought of as incompatible with being a child of God but of its very essence.

For whomever the Lord has adopted and deemed worthy of his fellowship ought to prepare themselves for a hard,

27 *Comm.* on Matt. 6:9 (*Harmony of the Evangelists* I, p. 317).

28 *Comm.* on Matt. 10:29 (*Harmony* I, p. 465).

toilsome, and unquiet life, crammed with many and various kinds of evil (*Inst.* 3:8:1).

But it is ever to be remembered that these things are not the product of impersonal forces of blind fate or chance or caprice but 'the Heavenly Father's will'. This is how even Christ as the Son of God learned obedience, and it is for the noble and ultimate purpose of conforming us to Christ's image that our Father so proceeds with us. What is more, this God who is our Father,

is not only a father but by far the best and kindest of all fathers, provided we cast ourselves upon his mercy, although we are ungrateful, rebellious and froward children (*Inst.* 3:8:1).