

Our Contributors.

Five Grades of Sonship.

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There are some who claim that God is the Father of the whole human race. Others think this a loose and dangerous view, affirming that God is the Father of his own regenerate children only. But there is no necessary divergence of view here. The seeming difference is explained by the fact that Fatherhood is taken in two different senses. If this were only recognized, all dispute and recrimination on this ground might be spared.

There is a natural relation of sonship, and there is a spiritual relation of sonship. By overlooking this vital distinction we may fall into serious mistake. An eloquent preacher waxed hot in defending the doctrine of final perseverance, on the ground that a lapsed child of God must inevitably be restored, because he is God's own child. On the same principle it might perhaps be contended that fallen angels must be restored, for I presume they are God's children in a natural sense. But they are not his children in a spiritual sense, and therein lies the fallacy of the argument. I am making no point here for or against inevitable final perseverance, but simply indicating the necessity of distinguishing between things that differ.

There are, in fact, five different grades of sonship recognized in Scripture. If we can identify these, and indicate some of the passages where they are recognized, perhaps some small service may be rendered to clearness of view, and consequent harmony.

To begin with the lowest grade, God is certainly recognized as the Father of the entire human race. Possibly I might have gone a grade lower than this, and claimed all apostate spirits as God's children. I believe they are so, in the same natural sense as all human beings are his children. But as we have no direct scripture warrant for that, I let it pass. That the entire human race may claim God as their Father may be freely accepted. Notice Luke's genealogy of Jesus Christ. He speaks of Jesus being, as was supposed, the son of Joseph, who was the son of so and so, who was the son of so and so, generation by generation, until he gets back to Adam, and of Adam he says that he was the Son of God. Thus God is recognized as the Father of the whole race. In that line of genealogy between Adam and Jesus there were those who were not good men, but they are in the line, and therefore sons of God. This is the natural, not the spiritual degree of sonship.

This natural sonship we may call creation; but I have a suspicion that it was something much more than that. I can believe that man was produced by some process that brought him much nearer to God than mere creation. I may be wrong, but I have the idea that it was a process of generation more than creation. Luke says that Adam was a son of God, and I suspect that if the whole truth were known, we might find that there was a process of generation, not similar to, but as intimate, as the process of ordinary generation. This, of course, is only a presentation, and it may be taken for what it is worth, but it seems to accord more closely with the idea of actual sonship than a theory of mere creation. Of course creation is the

main thing in the narrative, and the best thing, no doubt, to present to our limited understanding; yet there may have been creation, and something more, that made us as really God's own children as our children are our own.

And yet this is the lowest grade of sonship. It is analogous to ordinary generation with us, without any reference to character. It is the same relation to which Paul referred in his sermon on Mars' hill. Speaking to those idolators who knew not God, he classed himself with them, and endorses the sentiment of one of their own poets who said: "We are also his offspring." There is no moral distinction here. Those heathens, just as truly as the Christian apostle, were God's offspring. Thus we have the clearest Scripture warrant for regarding the whole race as the sons of God.

Now to rise to a higher grade, let it be noted that God specially recognises as his children those whom he appoints to special privilege and honor.

Perhaps some might designate this class as the church. Others might identify it with the favored nation of Israel. Both these ideas would be rather too definite. I prefer to say that those who were called to special privileges and duties, although as individuals they might not be actually regenerate, are called sons of God.

The message with which Moses was sent to Pharaoh was this: "Thus saith the Lord, Israel is my son, even my firstborn. And I say unto thee, let my son go, that he may serve me." (Exod iv. 23, 22.) When the Lord gave his law to Israel he made a solemn appeal for their obedience on the ground that they were his children. "Ye are the children of the Lord your God, ye shall not cut yourselves," and so on (Deut xiv. 1.) In later times, when the Lord was promising wonderful blessings to Israel, he gives as his reason for it that he was their father. "For," said he, "I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn." (Jer. xxxi. 9.)

Thus we see that there is a second grade of sonship, intermediate between the whole race and God's own regenerate children.

The next grade in the ascending scale is composed of the godly among the race.

Throughout Scripture generally the truly regenerate are spoken of as the sons of God, and the children of God. Thus in the early history of Genesis we are told that "the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair." I take it that those "sons of God" were the godly men of that early time, not angels, so some have supposed.

It is in the New Testament especially that the good are so designated. I may quote a few well known passages. "As many as are led by the spirit of God, they are the sons of God." "The spirit itself beareth witness with one spirit that we are the children of God." "If children, then heirs." "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us that we should be called the sons of God." "Beloved, now are we the sons of God." "Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God." "Whosoever is born of God sinneth not." "Whosoever is born of God overcometh the world."

Thus it is very plain that the regenerate are especially regarded as the children of God. Perhaps it is the abundant repetition

of this idea that has led some to regard that one class only as worthy of the name. We have seen that the name is applied to other classes, only with different significance.

And this distinction is very clearly brought out by our Lord himself in his discussion with the unbelieving Jews. He admits that in one sense they were the children of Abraham, while in another sense he denies it. "I know," he says, "that ye are Abraham's seed." This is, literally and in a natural sense they were so. But then he immediately adds, "If ye were Abraham's children, ye would do the works of Abraham." They were Abraham's children naturally, but not spiritually. Again he says, "If God were your Father ye would love me." On the contrary, he says plainly, "Ye are of your father, the devil." Thus he makes the distinction very plain which we noticed at the beginning—the distinction between natural and spiritual sonship; and this we must keep in view.

To rise, then, even to a higher grade of sonship than this, there is a sense in which angels are the sons of God.

I have said this is a higher grade, though perhaps, strictly speaking, it is not higher. Nothing can be higher than character; and to have a character like God is to be as closely his child in the high spiritual sense as angel or archangel can ever be. Still I have called the angelic degree of sonship a higher order because angels are of a higher rank than men, and because they assimilate more closely to the character of the Father. The difference is not of kind, but of degree.

That the angels are sons of God we have evidence in the Book of Job. We read there that "the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord." I take it that these sons of God were angels. This view is confirmed by another passage in Job. When the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind he takes him back into the dim past before the foundations of the world were laid. At creation's dawn "the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy." These are the sons of God whom Charles Wesley calls "the first born sons of light." They are the older sons of God's great family. They were shouting and singing at creation's dawn, and possibly millenniums before our human race was born.

Then from this high angelic grade of sonship we rise to the highest of all where Jesus himself appears—THE SON OF GOD—alone, supreme, divine.

I hesitated about introducing the divine Son in this connection at all. It seems in some degree to belittle him to classify him in any way whatever. Between the highest of "the first born sons of light" and THE SON OF GOD there is a chasm infinite. We must ever hold him aloft and supreme. We have to beware of any comparison or association that might obscure one ray of his glory. Just now I am reading an author who mixes up Plato and Thomas More and Philip Sydney and Jesus, as doing the same thing, each in his own way. And then we are told that "our young men and women must be to the world what Plato was, and More was, and Sydney was, and Jesus was." And not unfrequently we meet in modern authors with such allusions. They savor to me of irreverence. When Jesus is introduced I think it ought to be on a high, sacred, solitary plane where none other may intrude.

I trust, then, his glory will not be dimmed by introducing him as occupying the highest level of sonship. His place is not only the highest but infinitely the highest. Better lose sight of all other ranks of sonship when we think of his. He is emphatically THE SON OF GOD. When that title is used there