

## Children of God Becoming Deified Sons

**D**ebate about the use of inclusive language in the translation of the Bible largely has focused on the use of gender-neutral terms in English. Words such as *man*, *son*, *brother*, and the third person, singular *he*, which can be used generically to refer to both the male and female of the species, offend the sensitivities of many readers of the Bible. Unfortunately, the ways suggested to make these words more acceptable—using gender-neutral terms such as *human being*, *child*, *sibling*, using ungainly double referents such as *men and women*, *brother and/or sister*, and *he or she*, or changing to gender-neutral pronouns such as *they*, *we*, or *you*—introduce new problems, especially when they inaccurately reflect the divine revelation embodied in the original language of the texts.

Although the gender neutralization of *son* with *child* has not attracted much attention, it is a fitting example of the loss of some key aspects of biblical truth. By replacing *son* with *child*, translators unwittingly mask two aspects of the use of the word: the identification of the believers with Christ as the Son of God and the growth in life or maturity that is implied by the word *sons*, as opposed to *children*, in certain contexts. The truth of the believers as sons of God is an important revelation in the Bible, and it is very much related to the process of their deification. To deify us, to make us the same as He is in life and nature but not in the Godhead, Christ, as the Son of God, went through the process of incarnation, death, and resurrection in order to regenerate us to be children of God. Regeneration, however, is just the beginning of the process of deification. It is necessary for children to grow and mature in the divine life, to become full-grown sons of God. In this article we will examine the term *son* especially in reference to Christ and to the believers. We also will look at various Greek words describing the believers in the process of their growth in life. In particular, we will consider the notion that reference to the believers as sons of God indicates maturity in life, showing the importance of capturing this notion in

translation. Finally, we will address the notion of gender in the believers' relationship with God.

### Christ as the Son of God

God in His being is a God of life, as indicated by the name *Father*, *Son*, and *Spirit*, and God's salvation is organic rather than just judicial, moral, or ethical. In this regard, the word *son* is significant. It is striking in reference to Christ in the Divine Trinity and in His process of incarnation, death, and resurrection as well as in reference to the believers and the process they undergo, beginning with regeneration and consummating with glorification, their manifestation as mature sons of God. *Son* carries two main denotations in the Bible. It can refer to someone who has been begotten of, generated, or descended from, in terms of having the same life and nature of the begetter, or it can have the notion (common in Semitic languages) in which the meaning of the word *son* indicates a relationship to, or quality possessed by, someone.<sup>1</sup>

**I**n the Trinity the terms *Father*, *Son*, and *Spirit* are particularly striking. They indicate the organic existence of the Triune God as the God of life, not merely the roles He takes in His activity. The title indicates a particular relationship among the three of the Godhead. The Father is the eternal Begetter, the Son is the eternally begotten One, and the Spirit is "the Spirit of life between Father and Son" (Robichaux 13). *Son of God* may refer to a divine being, possessing the quality of divinity (in the way that angels are called sons of God in Genesis 6:2, 4 and in Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7). Yet when it is used as a reference to Christ, the denotation of *begotten from* is primary. Christ is distinct from other divine beings since He is called the only begotten Son of God (John 1:18; 3:16). As such, He was sent forth in time to be born of a woman (Gal. 4:4; Luke 1:35), to come in the likeness of the flesh of sin (Rom. 8:3), as a propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10) and Savior of the world (v. 14; John 3:17).<sup>2</sup>

The truth of the believers as sons of God is an important revelation in the Bible, and it is very much related to the process of their deification. Christ, as the Son of God, went through the process of incarnation, death, and resurrection in order to regenerate us to be children of God.

On earth, however, Christ referred to Himself as the Son of Man much more than the Son of God (5:25; 9:35; 10:36; 11:4; cf. Luke 2:49).<sup>3</sup> Here again, the designation *Son of Man* indicates not merely that He was a human being, possessing humanity, but more significantly that He was a genuine son of Mary and a descendant of David and Abraham with a proper human lineage (Matt. 1:1).<sup>4</sup>

**I**t was in this humanity that He underwent a change as He went through the process of death and resurrection. His human nature was uplifted, glorified, and thereby deified when He resurrected. Christ in His humanity was begotten as the Son of God (Psa. 2:7; Acts 13:33). As the human seed of David, He was designated the Son of God according to the Spirit of holiness, His divine essence (Rom. 1:4). Through this process He, in His humanity, became the firstborn Son of God among many brothers (8:29; Heb. 1:6; 2:11) and the model for other human beings to become sons of God, the same as He is in life, nature, and expression (2:10-11; 1 John 3:2).

According to His desire to make us the same as the firstborn Son in life and nature, God regenerates us to be His children (John 1:13). However, regeneration is only the beginning. The believers need to become mature sons of God through the process of being conformed to the image of the Firstborn (Rom. 8:29). To illustrate this process, the New Testament employs different terms to refer to the believers as they grow in the divine life, which consummates in becoming mature sons of God.

### Describing the Believers' Growth

In the Greek language several words describe human beings in various stages of maturity, all of which are used in reference to the believers in the New Testament. For example, βρέφος (babe) refers to an embryo, a young infant, or a small child; νήπιος (infant) refers to one who is not yet speaking; the diminutive of παῖς (child), παιδίον (small child, infant), τέκνον (child), and its diminutive τεκνίον (small child) all refer to children lacking maturity. In contrast, υἱός (son) refers to a mature child as well as a male child (Matt. 1:21, 23). Of all these terms, only υἱός is gender specific, although it also can be considered as the unmarked inclusive term; the gender specific or marked word θυγάτηρ (daughter) is used only once to refer to the believers in 2 Corinthians 6:18. An additional word that is also used to indicate the maturity of life is the term κληρονόμος (heir).

From the perspective that God's salvation is not just judicial but also organic, involving the impartation and growth of the divine life in the believers, the distinction in the meaning of these terms is significant. These terms indicate the need for the believers to mature in the divine life, to become mature sons of God. New believers are considered

as newborn babes (βρέφη) longing for the guileless milk of the word so that they may grow unto salvation (1 Pet. 2:2). This salvation does not refer to initial salvation but to God's full salvation, from regeneration unto maturity for glorification. The believers are also referred to as infants (νήπιοι). Yet they should not remain in the infant stage (except in malice, 1 Cor. 14:20), partaking of milk alone, but they also need solid food, the word of righteousness, in order to be full-grown and brought on to maturity (Heb. 5:13—6:1; 1 Cor. 3:1-2). If not, as little children or infants (νήπιοι), they are too easily tossed by waves and carried about by every wind of teaching (Eph. 4:14).<sup>5</sup> Paul uses the same word to refer to the Old Testament believers and unbelieving Gentiles kept under the law or under the elements of the world (Gal. 4:1-3).

**T**he believers are referred to as children using the diminutive of παῖς, παιδίον, as well as τέκνον and its diminutive τεκνίον (from the verb τίκτω "to give birth to, to bear"). The kingdom of the heavens requires us to become as little children (παιδίον, Matt. 18:3-5; 19:14; Mark 10:15). The Lord Jesus referred to the disciples and the aged apostle John referred to the believers endearingly as little children τεκνία (John 13:33; 1 John 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21) and young children παιδία (John 21:5; Heb. 2:13-14; 1 John 2:13, 18). Both John and Paul referred to the believers as children of God τέκνα θεοῦ, perhaps emphasizing the source of the divine birth (John 1:12; 11:52; Rom. 8:16-17, 21; 9:8; Eph. 5:1, 8; Phil. 2:15; 1 John 3:1-2, 10; 5:2). While the use of these words for *children* does not necessarily emphasize a lack of maturity in the growth in life, in certain contexts the words definitely indicate the lack of maturity among believers. For example, παιδία (children) "in understanding" contrasts with being full-grown (τέλειοι, 1 Cor. 14:20); παιδία (young children) contrasts with young men (νεανίσκοι) and fathers (1 John 2:13); τέκνα θεοῦ (children of God, Rom. 8:16) contrasts with sons (v. 14) and heirs (v. 17); and νήπιοι (children, lit. infants, minors) contrasts with sons and heirs in Galatians 3:24-26 and 4:1-7.

While the words mentioned above for the most part indicate or imply a lack of maturity, the word υἱός (son) indicates the attainment of maturity. As was mentioned above, υἱός is significant when it is used in reference to Christ in terms of His relationship to the Father and in terms of the process He went through to become the firstborn Son of God in His humanity. The goal of God's organic salvation is to make the believers the same as He is, to conform them to the image of His firstborn Son (Rom. 8:29), and to make them fully mature sons (υἱοί) of God. This process involves the deification of humanity. The process Christ underwent—stated succinctly by Athanasius, "He became man so that we might become God" (54, 3)—was not merely for the deification of His

own humanity but much more for the reproduction of that process in many believers (cf. John 12:24). He is called Son of God, and we are also called sons of God. Therefore, the word υἱός is used to refer to the believers particularly in the stage of maturity of life. The sons of God are those who are led by the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:14), those whose revelation is eagerly awaited by all creation (v. 19; cf. v. 21), those no longer enslaved under the elements of the world (Gal. 4:7), and those who are being led into glory (Heb. 2:10).

The New Testament also uses the term υιοθεσία (sonship), to be put into place (-θεσία) as a son (υἱός), to refer to the process in which a believer attains to the position and status of a mature son, entitled to all the rights and privileges of an adult son. This process began in eternity past with predestination (Eph. 1:5) and consummates with the redemption of our body (Rom. 8:23; see "Sonship or Adoption as Sons?," *Affirmation & Critique*, V.4 (October 2002): 39-40).

The word *heir* κληρονόμος also indicates maturity. Sons of God are heirs (Gal. 4:7; cf. Rom. 8:17). We have been saved, regenerated, and justified in order to become heirs (Titus 3:7; James 2:5). *Son* is particularly significant in dealing with inheritance. In ancient times inheritance laws privileged the son who inherited everything when he came of age. When the believers attain to the maturity in life of being mature sons of God, they are qualified to inherit all that God is and has for them.

Sensitivity to gender-inclusive language must not blur significant distinctions in God's economy such as Father, Son, and sons in relation to God, Christ, and the believers. Not only do we need to mature in the divine life, but as many sons of God, we also need to become the same as Christ, the firstborn Son of God, in life and nature.

The human father-son relationship points toward a particular relationship that all believers have with God. God is not just the God of the believers as their Creator (a relationship that is not unique to the believers but common to all created beings). God is also the Father of the believers, something sweeter and more intimate than being merely the Creator. He has regenerated them with His life and nature; this means that they are begotten, or born, of God (John 1:13). On the one hand, Christ enjoys this relationship with God the Father, both as the only begotten Son

in His deity and as the firstborn Son in His humanity. On the other hand, the believers are brought into a relationship with God the Father through Christ so that they also become sons of God. He is the firstborn Son, and they are the many sons, His brothers (Rom. 8:29), to whom He declares the Father's name in the midst of the church (Heb. 2:12). As sons they inherit all that the Father has and gives to them of His life, nature, and expression in order to become the same as He is.

The term *son* is a referent to all the believers regardless of gender, and it supersedes differences in the old creation, belonging to the new creation, in which natural gender is no longer an issue. In the new creation, believers are also characterized as female. For example, the believers are considered as virgins going forth to meet their bridegroom (Matt. 25:1; cf. 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 14:4) and collectively as the bride of Christ (21:2, 9; 22:17). These refer to all believers. As Witness Lee points out:

According to life, all the believers, including the sisters, are sons of God and brothers of Christ. For this reason, in his Epistles Paul addresses the brothers, but not the brothers and sisters. The sisters, of course, are included in the term *brothers*.

According to life, all the believers are males. However, according to love, we all are females. Christ is our Bridegroom, and we are His bride. The relationship between the bride and the Bridegroom is a matter of love, not a matter of life. Love is the unique requirement of married life. Therefore, we are living sons of the living God, whereas we are the loving bride of our dear Bridegroom. How, then, would you answer this question: Are we, the believers in Christ, males or females? The proper way to answer is to reply that according to life we are males, but according to love we are females. (42)

In the old creation there are distinctions between male and female. Distinctions in the natural realm, such as father and son, husband and wife, point to realities in God's economy in His relationship with humanity. These human relationships convey a sense of His heart's desire in His economy in the divine and mystical realm of the new creation because gender differences no longer exist in the new creation. Paul makes this clear when he states that in the new man "there cannot be...male and female" (Gal. 3:28). Gender differences are precluded in the new creation where "Christ is

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all and in all” (Col. 3:10-11). The Lord Jesus even indicated that natural distinctions between the sexes are not present in resurrection; rather, the believers will be as the angels (Matt. 22:30; Luke 20:35-36). The gender distinctions in the old creation are negated in the new creation, and it is important that realities of the new creation not be obscured by awkwardly employing terms that attempt to solve the sensitivities of the old creation.

## Conclusion

The designation of the believers as sons of God is significant, especially if we view God’s economy from its organic standpoint, from the point of view of life, rather than from the perspective of judicial redemption, human morality, or gender. The term *son of God* indicates that a believer has been generated or begotten of God and has the same life and nature as God the Father and that he is the same in life and nature as the unique only begotten Son who became the firstborn Son of God. The term *son* also indicates maturity in the divine life. The use of inclusive language in the translation of the Bible should not be done at the expense of important biblical truths.<sup>6</sup> By translating υἱοί as *children*, not only is the notion of our identity with the firstborn Son through our deification obscured, but the notion of our need to grow in the divine life unto maturity is lost.<sup>7</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Both the words *sons* and *children* are used in Semitic languages to indicate a relationship to, or a quality possessed by, someone. This use can be seen in the New Testament, for example, in the expressions *sons of peace*, *sons of thunder*, *sons of light*, *sons of the bridechamber*, and *children of wrath*.

<sup>2</sup>It is significant to note that Christ is never referred to as a Child of God in the New Testament. The term *child* is used to refer to Him only when He was a child growing up (e.g., παιδίον Matt. 2:8, 20; Luke 1:80; 2:40). Twice the word παῖς is used to refer to Jesus, but this is best translated *Servant* (Acts 3:13, 26).

<sup>3</sup>When others referred to Him as the Son of God, He did not deny it. Indeed His confirmation of the fact gave the Jewish leaders justification to condemn Him to death (Luke 22:70-71; Matt. 26:64-65; cf. Mark 14:61-63).

<sup>4</sup>By using this title He indicated that He was taking His stand on earth as a genuine human being (as indicated by the way He defeated the tempter in Matthew 4, not as the Son of God according to the way Satan addressed Him, but as a man). He existed in the likeness of men and was found in fashion as a man (Phil. 2:7-8). Referring to Himself in view of all the steps of His process, He designates Himself the Son of Man: in His human living (Matt. 8:20), suffering (17:12), death (vv. 22-23;

20:18, 28; 26:2, 45; John 3:14; 8:28), burial (Matt. 12:40), resurrection (17:9), ascension (John 6:62), enthronement (Matt. 26:64; Acts 7:56; Rev. 14:14), and coming in His kingdom (Matt. 16:27; 19:28; 24:27, 30; 25:31; 26:64).

<sup>5</sup>According to Liddell and Scott, the word νήπιος is a compound of νη- (not) and ἔπος (word, speaking), and it means “not speaking” or “unable to speak.” In application to this verse perhaps we could say that infants are characterized by those who cannot withstand the winds of teaching by rendering an appropriate answer to, or defense against, those deceiving and leading them astray.

<sup>6</sup>Some of those arguing for gender-inclusive language in the translation of the Bible cite biblical and historical precedents for its use. Paul uses the phrase *sons and daughters* in 2 Corinthians 6:18 in what could be a paraphrased reworking of 2 Samuel 7:14, “He will be My son,” from singular to plural, third person to second person, and masculine to masculine and feminine. The quotation is more likely to be a blending of the language of several texts (Hosea 1:10, “you”; 2 Sam. 7:14, “My son”; and Isa. 43:6, “sons” and “daughters”). Another precedent cited occurs in translation. Tyndale followed by the King James Version translates υἱοί θεοῦ as “children of God” in Matthew 5:9 (cf. v. 45, “children of your Father”). However, the use of “sons and daughters” or “children” for υἱοί are exceptions and not the rule (cf. Carson 19-20).

<sup>7</sup>The latest translation to take into account gender-inclusive language, the TNIV, uses the terms *his sons* in Galatians 4:6 and *adoption to sonship* in v. 5, Romans 8:15, and Ephesians 1:5, perhaps in recognition of this matter. It is noteworthy that they use *sonship*, containing the prefix *son-* as opposed to the gender-neutral prefix *child-* as in *childhood*, a word which definitely carries notions of immaturity in English.

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