Class 5 Summary – Adoptionism

What is Adoptionism?

Adoptionism is the heresy which asserts a double sonship in Jesus Christ: as divine, Christ is the Son of God by generation and nature, but as human he is the Son of God by adoption and grace. By separating the divinity and humanity of Christ in this way, it can be considered an off-shoot of Nestorianism. It originated in Spain in the 8th century and is chiefly associated with the Arch-bishop of Toledo, Elipandus (717-802 AD). It was condemned in a letter to the bishops of Spain by Pope Hadrian I in 785 AD, and by the Council of Frankfurt in 794 AD.

If you look in accounts of the history of doctrine for a quick definition of Adoptionism, you will read that it is the belief that the human being Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God not by nature but by the adoption. You might see it linked specifically to the baptism story in Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22 and to the idea that Jesus of Nazareth became the Son of God at this moment, the moment of his baptism.

Any attempt to explore more about what this means will take you very quickly into the many centuries of debate about exactly what can be said about the divinity and the humanity of Jesus Christ, and it will take you in different directions depending on which version of Adoptionism you choose to focus on. Historical accounts of Adoptionism contain references to a very wide range of people, times and places. That is perhaps important in itself, because it serves as a reminder that heresies, or the issues they represent, keep coming back. In its most prominent form, Adoptionism was advocated by a group of (mostly) Spanish theologians, notably Elipandus and condemned by Pope Hadrian I, in the 8th century.

Elipandus, when he asserted that Jesus of Nazareth was Son of God “adoptively”, was trying to convey a very important insight about Jesus’ baptism and what it represents. He wanted to say that just as God lifts up Jesus of Nazareth – from this moment of affirming him as “beloved son” through to his resurrection and ascension – God lifts up all of us who are Jesus’ brothers and sisters. The journey towards sharing in God’s glory that this man Jesus of Nazareth makes is the journey that we all come to make. We share in his glorification; we each become someone to whom God says, “You are my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased.” So if we are “adopted” as God’s children, Elipandus said – if that is a good way to talk about our relationship to God in Christ, about the gift we receive ion Christ – it must also be a possible way to talk about the relationship to the God of the man Jesus.

Elipandus also argued that to talk about Jesus’ sonship as “adoptive” was the best way to do justice to the humiliation of the Son of God in Jesus of Nazareth, the best way to say that, as we read in Philippians 2:6, the Son of God “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.” The Son of God gives up, in the incarnation, his rights as a son “by nature”, and goes the way of humiliation and exaltation to receive his sonship “by adoption”.

The later Adoptionists, if not the earlier ones, knew they were taking a risk describing Jesus of Nazareth as Son of God “by adoption”, and they knew it might make a mess of other parts of the Christological picture. They did it because they wanted to emphasize to the point of hyperbole the idea that everything God gives to Jesus of Nazareth, God gives to us; and also the idea of the complete “giving up” of the status proper to God that the incarnation represents. They were pushing the language used to speak about Jesus’ co-humanity with the rest of humanity as far as it would go.